EASY EYE

NON-GLARE PAPER

LARGER TYPE

A LEE FLOREN WESTERN

WYOMING GUN LAW

Two desperate men match courage as the West explodes in the roaring hell of a range war!

Original title: *Troubled Grass*

DESPERATE INHERITANCE

The man lay in bed, both arms bent so that his hairy hands touched his chest. His eyes and mouth were closed. Big Bob Williams was dead.

Matt Williams looked at his father's corpse. "So the old gent with the scythe finally got you, eh old man?" The dead man did not reply.

"I took a lot from you," said Matt to his father. "You whipped me and said it was for my own good. At one time no man dared cross you. But age got you, and no one will ever have to worry about you again.

"Now they got me to worry about, old man. You thought times were changing—that the open range had to be fenced off. Well, the man that dares fence off my land—*my* land, old man!—is gonna die! I don't give a damn if I have to blow the lid off this whole territory!"

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WYOMING GUN LAW

A LEE FLOREN WESTERN

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WYOMING GUN LAW

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Chapter ONE

THE CHEYENNES say that when a great man dies a shooting star streaks across the black Wyoming night. But no shooting star soared across the sky the night that Big Bob Williams died in the immense ranch house he had built on Ringbone Creek—the home ranch of his mighty Cross in a Circle.

And Big Bob was a great man.

When only twenty he had trailed wild longhorns north into Wyoming Territory. Now he was seventy-three . . . and he was dying. He had worn out three wives. Two had been barren but the third had produced him a son.

Sometimes, in bitter anger, he had cursed the day that son, Matt Williams, had been born.

Now this was the night that Big Bob was to die. He lay with his eyes closed and his chest barely moving. He knew he was dying, too.

That thought held no fear. Pain had long fallen back before the pressure of Death. Therefore he had no pain. He lay with his once powerful body shrunken and thin.

Lamplight glistened on his thin blue eyelids. He

had no eyes for his son who stood beside the bed.

Matt Williams looked at the Crow squaw who crouched beside the bed—the squaw who held Big Bob's bony hand as it dangled over the side of the bed.

"How does he feel, Many Feathers?"

The Crow squaw did not answer. She clung to the shrunken hand, and she rocked forward, moaning like an injured pup.

"How is he?" the son repeated.

Now she looked up, her eyes shiny beads, and she shook her dark big head. For the moment, then, Matt thought she meant his father had died. So Matt put his hand, palm down, on the old cowman's chest.

He felt the heart push pressure against his palm.

Big Bob opened his eyes slowly.

"Matt?"

"Yes, Big Bob."

He had never been *son* to Big Bob. Nor had he ever called his sire anything but Big Bob. Never dad or father. Never son or boy.

That explained their feelings to each other.

"Matt, the days of open range are over with," the dying man said.

"I don't agree with you, Big Bob."

The eyes swept across him, then closed. The squaw watched and her face was dark and impas-

sive. She had been Big Bob's fourth "wife." He had never married her, though. In those days a white man did not marry a squaw. She just became his wife without religious or civil ceremony.

"Don't start a range war, son."

Matt Williams' craggy face showed a frown. Never before, in his memory, had his sire called him "son".

"I'll not have squatters on Cross in a Circle range," Matt said.

The white lips moved, but at first no sounds came. Then the words formed and they said, "Not our range. They take up the land legally. Our day —the day of open range—is gone. . . ."

Big Bob's lips moved, but more words refused to come.

For a moment, then, dark anger swept across Matt Williams' face. He was twenty-eight, and he had never married—but he had had his share of women, both redskins and white. He was six-feet one, straight as a Crow buck, but the gods had cursed him the day he had been born, and the gods had given him ambition. Big Bob had said this ambition would destroy his son. He had told Many Feathers that and both had wondered about the future, for Big Bob was only mortal and would have to die.

"I don't agree."

Big Bob lay silent, face ashen.

Many Feathers said, "You go, please, Matt."

Anger grooving his face, Matt Williams turned and walked out on the porch, and he stood there with the cool mountain breeze on him, and he looked at the sky. There were millions of stars up there. And he remembered the old Cheyenne legend.

Foolish things, old legends. Foolish ideas in old men and old women. Odd, the older a person got, the more he swung back to his childhood beliefs. Matt Williams looked at the stars and waited . . . and impatience was raw in him. Why didn't the Old Man die and get it over with?

From behind the huge log barn the stallion neighed as he circled his corral, for he wanted open range and his mares. An owl hooted in the willows along the creek and a trout splashed there as he leapt after a night insect. The earth was damp and good, for a rain had fallen the day before, and he got the smell of the earth—the smell of green bluestem grass, of flowering sage-brush, of willows and cottonwoods. This was a peaceful night. A man should not die on a night this peaceful. He should die on a stormy wild night with lightning and thunder and snarling rain. But still, Big Bob was dying.

Matt heard boots, and a man came out of the night. He sighed and sat on the steps, and he looked up at Matt Williams. This man had

very heavy shoulders, he was not over five-four in height, and his thighs were like thick boles of a pine tree. He sighed again, and the sigh was like the man—heavy and stolid and weighty.

"How is he, Matt?"

"Dying, Keller."

Ag Keller rolled a cigarette with huge fingers—but fingers singularly fast near any gun. "To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late," he quoted. "She waits for all of us, does Old Lady Death."

"For hell's sake, quit that!"

Ag Keller lit the cigarette and the match showed his ugly, heavy face with the knife scar across the right jowl.

"Matt, don't jump on me."

"Then keep your mouth closed."

Keller sat silent, puffing his smoke. The coal glowed, ebbed and died. Lights from the bunkhouse threw rectangular layers across the Wyoming earth. A man came out of the barn, dark against darkness, and he entered the bunkhouse, the lighted doorway illuminating his gaunt height.

"The boys," said Keller, "are ready to ride, Matt." He flexed his gun-hand.

Matt Williams did not answer. For the squaw had come out of the house, moving on padded moccasins, and she keened, "He is dead, he is dead!"

"When?" Matt Williams asked.

"Right now, he die."

Matt Williams pushed her hard, sending her against the wall. She seemed to break in two, and she sat down. "And no stars fell," Matt said. "Get your things, squaw, and be off this ranch before morning!"

"But your father said—"

"Big Bob is dead. Get off by morning."

Ag Keller stood up, "Shall I get the boys?"

"Get them! We ride."

"I'll get them," Ag Keller said. "What do you mean, Matt, by saying that no stars fell? I don't foller your line of thinkin'."

"Get the men, and get them ready."

"How many of the boys?"

"Three, besides us."

"As you say, Matt."

Ag Keller's boots made their sounds. Matt Williams watched him go into the bunkhouse. Then the new owner of the big Cross in a Circle turned and looked down at the squaw. She was sobbing now. Her sobs were broken, low, and full of misery and pain.

Matt Williams kicked her. She sprawled across the porch, then got to her feet, cursed him, and ran into the house. He followed her. She had taken a rifle off the deerhorns over the fireplace. He ripped the .30-30 from her hands. For a mo-

ment the thought came that he should kill her. He did not know why he did not kill her. He hit her with the stock of the rifle, using it like a soldier uses a bayonet. The butt-plate hit her across the back of the neck and knocked her unconscious.

"There! Damn it! Damn it!" he said.

He turned suddenly, as though expecting his father to come into the room, for his father, he knew, had loved this squaw more than any of his three wives. Then he remembered that Big Bob was dead and his body was losing heat in the bedroom, and that thought was good—for now he owned the Cross in a Circle.

Carrying the rifle, he went outside. Gravel crunched under his boots as he went toward the barn. Somebody had a lantern hanging from the ridge beam and it showed the riders gathered there. They had already saddled and Ag Keller held the reins of the big black four-year-old stallion.

"Saddled Midnight for you, Matt."

Matt Williams found a stirrup and lifted himself. The stallion rose on his hind legs, and Matt Williams' quirt, coming down on his neck, put his forefeet again on the earth.

"We got everything we need," Ag Keller said. "Powder to blow up hell, fire to start it burnin', and guns to notch off anybody."

"Where to, Matt?" a puncher asked.

Matt Williams said, "We raid that nester over on Lime Crick. He's single and we burn down his spread. We leave his carcass filled with lead as a warning to those others."

"We'll kill him," Ag Keller said.

Matt Williams turned the black. "Ride, men."

They roared out of the ranch's yard. Behind them the starlight showed the thin Wyoming dust. Behind them the squaw lay on the floor, blood from her mouth; she breathed, but she was unconscious. In his bedroom Big Bob Williams lay with his mouth open, but no breath came from him. And his son, riding at the point of his gunmen, swept out of the yard and the brush along the creek knew the sound of hurrying hoofs, and the trees threw shadows across the riders.

Matt Williams looked at the sky.

"Not a star fell," he quoted himself.

Ag Keller leaned toward Matt. Starlight showed on his wide, ugly face. "You say something about *stars*, again, Matt?"

"Keep your damn mouth shut!" Matt Williams ordered.

Chapter TWO

THE TOWN of Ringbone, Territory of Wyoming, is situated on the flat, and the creek known as Ringbone Creek flows through it. When the railroad built into Ringbone in 1886, the town was then known as Williamstown, being named after Big Bob Williams, but the railroad changed the name to Ringbone, a fact that Big Bob had always resented. Many of the old timers, in honor of Big Bob, always called it Williamstown—at least, they had called it by that name when Big Bob had been in their company.

Three days before the death of the cattle baron, a fat Mexican had ridden into Ringbone. He was a short, heavy-set man, almost as wide as he was tall, and he had a thick dark face, his jowls a little too heavy. He rode a horse with a Texas brand—a brand that came from the Panhandle country around what is now Lubbock, Texas. And a Texan who had, a few years before, come up the Trail with Cross in a Circle cattle, saw him and, after reading the brand on the Mexican's bronc, he had decided to pick trouble with the Mexican.

Accordingly, the Texan had swaggered out of

the Star Rowel Saloon, walking with an assumed importance. The Texan had grabbed the reins of the Mexican's horse, forcing the animal to a halt.

"I used to work for the Mill Iron outfit on the Panhandle," the Texan declared. "Your hoss packs the Mill Iron brand. Them Mill Iron people don't sell their hosses to greasers, nor does a greaser work for them."

The implication was plain. The Texan was accusing the Mexican of stealing the Mill Iron horse.

"Me, I buy this horse," the Mexican said. "Now you take the hands off the reins, no?"

"You stole this Mill Iron bronc, eh?"

The Mexican showed a smile filled with white teeth. It was a disarming smile, almost a foolish smile, yet its qualities were not certain to the Texan. He was a little puzzled by the foolishness of the smile. The Mexican actually fawned on him. Maybe the gent was *loco?*

"I got a beel-of-the-sale for thees bronc," the Mexican said. "I show heem to you." Grimy and stubby fingers dug into his vest pocket and came out with a folded square of dirty paper. The fingers straightened the paper and the Texan saw the thick lips purse.

"Thees ees not eet. Thees ees a letter from Conchita, my woman."

"You ain't got no bill-of-sale!"

"You call me the liar, no?"

"I say you lie!"

There was more to this than the discussion about a horse. Texans hated Mexicans and the Mexican knew the trailman was not interested in the horse's ownership—he wanted to kill a Mexican. The man, he knew, was about half drunk —his breath was vile with whiskey.

"I no lie!"

"I'm callin' you a liar, spic!"

The Texan had his right hand on his gun. The Mexican kicked him under the jaw. One moment the Mexican's right boot had been in the wide Sonora stirrup; the next, it was under the Texan's jaw—and it came in hard and fast.

The Mexican felt his boot-toe smash down the man's Adam's apple. He heard the crack of the Texan's jawbone. The Texan went back, his arms working, and he lifted his gun, swinging it as he fought for balance.

He glimpsed the Mexican, but this time the man was on his feet; he felt the pistol being wrenched from his grip. Then he sat down and held his head and moaned, the fight and swagger gone out of him.

The town marshal—a man named Bill Jenkins —came running. When he got to the scene the Mexican handed him the Texan's gun.

"He might get the hurt weeth the gon, Meester Marshal."

The marshal studied the Texan. He looked down at the man so he could hide the surprise in

his eyes. Then he lifted his grey eyes and looked at the Mexican. This did not seem possible.

"Who helped you down Sig Rudder, fellow?"

The Mexican's heavy shoulders rose and fell. "Nobody he help me. I does eet all by my lonesome."

"He's a gunman," the marshal said. "He rides for the Cross in a Circle. That's a tough outfit. You've heard of it, I reckon?"

The Mexican had heard. But he said, "No, I stranger here. The name ees Tortilla Joe."

The Texan suddenly groaned. He lay on his side and rolled over. In a thin, pained voice he said, "He busted my jaw. He kicked me in the face. My throat—I can't hardly speak. He took my gun."

A man came out of the Mercantile. Later the Mexican was to learn that this man's name was Matt Williams. Williams said to the Texan, "Get on your lousy feet, Sig Rudder. Get over to the doctor's office. Get your jaw patched up and get to hell out of Ringbone. If I catch you on this grass inside of four hours I'll kill you and find pleasure in it."

Two townsmen helped Rudder up and then, holding him between them, they took him down the street. Matt Williams looked at the Mexican. The man's eyes held a thoughtful scrutiny.

"I saw you down him, Mexican. You work fast and good."

"You hate him?"

"He worked for me," Williams said.

"You own Cross in Circle spread?"

"I do."

They looked at each other. Williams got the impression that this man, who looked so lazy and soft and easy-going, was, in reality, a hell-cat in boots. There was something else in the Mexican's dove-like brown eyes. It was a silent and weighty appraisal. It was a cold appraisal. And Matt Williams, for some reason, felt uneasy.

"I can use a man like you," Williams said.

"*Gracias.*"

"The pay is a hundred per month with your gun thrown in. Beans and flops are on the ranch."

"I no want job."

"Then why say *thanks?*"

"Work ees my enemy," Tortilla Joe said. "I hates the work. I want to know where my enemies they are. One of my enemies ees then at the Cross een the Circle spread, no?"

Somebody laughed at the joke. Williams, though, did not laugh. Was it a joke? This Mexican said he had an enemy at the Cross in a Circle. Was that enemy labor—or was it a human enemy?

"That's one way to put it," Matt Williams said.

The Mexican said, "Me, I hears that the Cross een the Circle outerfit she ees owned by a mans named Beeg Bob Weeliams."

"He's my father. He's—sick."

"Oh, I sees."

Matt Williams said, "Mex, if I was you I believe I'd ride down the road talkin' to myself. You kicked around a Cross in the Circle rider. You can't run against the Cross in a Circle here. My 'outerfit' built this town and this country."

"I stay a few days?"

Matt Williams' eyes drew down. "Sig Rudder will be after you. Sig will reach for his gun the next time."

"Maybe then I works for you? You gives me a week or so to rest up?" The Mexican sighed with a great weariness. "I ride hard up the trails, mans."

Matt Williams nodded. Tortilla Joe wanted to give the impression that he was a wanted man, a *renegado*. Williams turned and then pivoted as a thought struck him, and this time his eyes were flint.

"Listen, mister, you ain't a nester, are you?"

"Me a farmer! You makes me laugh! Do the farmers bother you?"

"They've moved in," Williams said hurriedly. "My dad—he— Well, we'll run them out. They can't squat on Cross in a Circle grass and get away with it."

"You hire me as a gonman?"

"The same."

"Me, I theenks eet over."

"Don't think too long."

So Tortilla Joe stayed around Ringbone town. He drank a little—but not much; he found a woman who could make *tortillas*—she was the Mexican cook in the Spoon and Fork Café. Her name was Margarita and she had had five husbands and she wanted the sixth. Tortilla Joe saw desire in her dark eyes.

She smelled of garlic and peppers, though.

He had a bedroll and he slept out in the hills. Rudder got out of the *medico's* office and walked around town with his jaw wrapped up. His eyes were evil and small and scheming. The second night Tortilla Joe changed bed locations. He slept in the brush in an unnamed coulee and he strung ropes around about ankle-high. Anybody who tried to sneak up on him in the dark would be tripped. Next morning he was back in Ringbone at the Spoon and Fork with Margarita fawning over him. She wore her dresses a little low in front and each time she had a chance she leaned over more than she should have leaned. And each time she leaned she was directly in front of him.

But who else could make such *tortillas?* The Mexican crunched through the crust and beans. Seasoned just right with chili peppers and salt. A good cook, but with five husbands behind her, how would the sixth fare?

"You are the nice womans."

"Me, I am not more than *nice,* Tortilla Joe?"

The Mexican realized he had said the wrong

thing. He asked, "There ees a farmer here an' hees name ees Juan Powers?"

"*Si*, John Powers."

"Where ees hees farm?"

"The creek she ees called Hanging Woman's Creek. She ees northwest of town, on grass claimed by Big Bob Weeliams."

Tortilla Joe nodded.

"You know heem?"

"No," the Mexican lied.

That night Sig Rudder jumped him. Tortilla Joe did not want to fight but he had to defend himself and when the roar ended Sig Rudder was dead. He was very, very dead. The top of his head was gone.

It happened in front of a saloon.

Sig Rudder had come out onto the plank sidewalk, and he had called Tortilla Joe all the dirty names he could remember. And he had a long memory along the filthy line. Tortilla Joe had tried to get away from him. He had had, finally, no other choice. Sig Rudder had a rep as a gunslinger. Yet, when it ended, he was dead; his bullet had gone low, and it had ripped into the plank sidewalk.

The marshal had gasped, conquered his surprise, and then said, "You can sure sling a sudden gun, Mexican. I saw Rudder jump you; it was self-defense in my book. But the book of Big Bob

Williams is a different volume than mine. . . ."

"I do nothing against the Cross een a Circle."

"Why are you sticking around this burg?"

"Me, I likes the *senora,* Margarita."

The marshal shook his head sadly. "I don't believe that, Tortilla Joe. You might like her *tortillas* but as for liking her . . . Don't say I didn't warn you, friend."

"Gracias."

That night three things happened. Even today, were you to go to Ringbone, Wyoming, and if you talked to some old-timer, he would mention these three stirring events.

First, Big Bob Williams—Williams, the cattle-baron who counted his cows in thousands—died in the big four-poster bed at the Cross in a Circle outfit, out on Ringbone Creek.

Big Bob had seen it was useless to fight the farmers. Now the control of his outfit went to his hot-headed arrogant son. Matt Williams moved against the farmers right away.

Second, Matt Williams and his riders burned down the nester's spread out there on Lime Creek. They burned the man's shack to the ground, killed his livestock, and shot him and let him burn in his cabin.

The third thing was the arrival of one man—and that man was Tortilla Joe's partner, lanky Buck McKee.

Chapter THREE

THEY CAME RIDING through the starlight, and they were hard-riding Wyoming men. They rode toward Buck McKee. And the lanky cowpuncher drew in his jaded bronc and watched them streak down a hill about a quarter-mile ahead. They were black scurrying ants moving under the starlight.

Buck McKee thought, "They ride like the devil was burning their broncs' rumps," and he had a feeling, for some reason, that he was in danger. Men did not ride range in such a hard-riding group unless they rode for deviltry. And Buck McKee knew there was trouble on this Ringbone range, for John Powers' letter had told him that. And these riders looked like trouble to him.

He had intended to come quietly into Ringbone, scout around, and do some ground-work, but here these riders were bearing down on him. He counted them and counted five, and then he decided to beat a retreat. Accordingly he swung his bronc and started to lope away at an angle.

One of the riders hollered, "There rides a damned nester!" and Buck heard the whine of a bullet overhead—a bullet that made him instinc-

tively duck. He saw the red flare of the man's pistol; another pistol cut the night with flame, too—its bullet, though, must have gone real wide, for Buck did not hear it. By this time he was out of saddle, for he left his saddle on the run, and he was on the ground, lying on his belly, his .45 across his forearm ahead of him.

Anger marked the cowpuncher's lank face. He knew nobody on this range except John Powers, and Powers was a friend—not an enemy. He shot once and he thought he saw a rider flinch in leather, but he was not sure because vision was uncertain. Other riders shot, and then they thundered on into the night. They roared over a ridge, dipped out of sight; then there was the sound of their broncs' hoofs. And the faint lingering smell of Wyoming dust. . . .

Then they were gone.

Buck got to his feet. He was well over six feet tall, thin to a toothpick's gauntness, and he wore range-clothes—run-over Justins, patched leather chaps, and a gray flannel shirt. His hat lay about ten feet away and he walked over and retrieved it, and he still packed that puzzled scowl. The riders had shot at him, then had ridden on. . . . did this make sense? Why didn't they make a pitched battle of it for they had had him outnumbered?

Behind him was a steep hill and its surface was

marked by black igneous boulders. He saw now why they had not desired to wage a pitched battle. He could have retreated back into the boulders and there, with altitude on his side, he could have held off an army.

He remembered that one had hollered, "There rides a damned nester!"

Evidently these riders, then, were cowboys. Evidently, too, farmers were moving in on Ringbone.

He punched a new crease in his old hat and restored it to his head and mounted, catching his stirrup on the run. He would get out of here. He was sure he had wounded one of the night-riders. He remembered seeing the rider sag suddenly in saddle, and he remembered he had stooped forward against his horn as his bronc had continued running.

He was a little angry, too.

He had cause to be angry.

John Powers had written him, asking him to come for a visit. He and John had punched cows together up on the Milk River in Montana Territory. That had been—well, Time had wings, and Time flew fast. . . . Buck reckoned back and decided it had been almost ten years before.

These scissorbills—these night-riders—had had no reason or right to shoot at him. They might have killed him. Who were they?

He decided further mental questions were useless. Somewhere ahead was Ringbone town. John Powers was there. John would answer his questions.

He rode to the crest of a low, rocky hill.

Even before he got to the top of the hill, he saw the red savage glare of the fire. Its flames marred the starlight of the Wyoming sky with a go'den and ugly smear of color. Then, as the top of the hill was gained, he saw the fire below him. About half a mile away a house was burning. A small house, not much more than a shack; he could see the skeleton framework of it—the flames were eating up the studs and rafters with licking scarlet fingers.

For a moment, he hesitated. Somewhere back in his mind he tied together two things—first, the night-riders; second, this burning homestead shack. Evidently the cowpunchers he had run into had set this fire. They were running a nester off of Ringbone range.

Buck thought, "None of my business."

Then the thought came that perhaps some human down below needed his help. Perhaps somebody was wounded, or somebody was dying. . . . His spurs found his tired pony and lifted him to a lope toward the burning house.

He almost ran over the rider who came out of some high buckbrush. As it was, their broncs

swerved, and Buck, surprised as he was, detected the glint of steel in the rider's hand. . . . Gun steel. . . .

His first thought was that the cowmen had left some riders behind to ambush any nesters who came to investigate the burning of the shack. That was a logical thought, and with it was the thought that this was his unlucky night. He should have ridden around the burning shack and he should have headed into Ringbone town and there reported the fire to the Law.

Just now, though, this rider had a pistol.

Buck McKee left his saddle. He moved with automatic easiness, and he got both arms around the rider's belt, and he dragged him to the ground, flopping him out of saddle. The pistol went off once. Because Buck had the rider's arms pinned, the bullet went straight down into the earth. The rider didn't shoot again. Buck got his thumb under the hammer of the .45.

The rider grunted something, and then they were rolling over; they rolled twice. When they stopped Buck was on top, holding down the rider's arms. He panted, "What the hell you trying to do—," and then, suddenly, he stopped. He got to his feet. His face, for some reason, was flushed—so flushed, in fact, that his embarrassment was discernible even under the dim starlight.

"So help me," he said huskily, "if it ain't *a woman!*"

She sat up. Her young face was struggling with uncontrollable anger. Quickly she got to her feet. She had lost her hat and dark hair tumbled around her small shoulders.

She slapped at him, saying angrily, "You big stupid ox! You could have killed me!"

Buck caught her wrist. He did not let go of it. She struggled, tried to slap him with her free hand; he got that, too. She was rawhide tough despite the softness of her womanly body.

She wore levis. Under her shirt her breasts rose and fell.

"Let go of me, you murdering Cross in a Circle killer!"

Buck said, "Don't push me too far, gal. I'll get mad and forget I'm a gentleman."

"You mean a killer, not a gentleman! Gentlemen don't draw wages from the Williams' spread!"

She kicked him on the shin. She kicked hard, too.

Buck McKee said, "Ouch!" and released her hands. He sat on the ground and held his shin. "You got lead in thet boot, Miss?"

She did not answer. She had her pistol. She held it in both hands. She pointed it at Buck who remained seated.

"I should—kill you!"

Buck had a very uneasy moment. She was angry enough to pull the trigger. The heavy .45 wavered under her grip. Buck decided to do nothing. If he got up, and he grabbed for the gun —then, sure as anything, she would shoot. She might hit him—and she might miss him. He decided to remain sitting down.

"What's this all about?" he wanted to know.

The flame of the burning cabin showed the tremor in her full lips. Buck decided, there and then, that she was a beauty. She had the clean, sweeping loveliness of open range, of sunshine. Buck watched her closely. Their eyes met—hers angry and hot, his as calm as he could make them.

Buck murmured, "Miss, I'm not a Cross in a Circle rider, as you said. I don't even know where that iron is *located.* You accused me of drawin' wages from some spread called the Williams' spread. Me, I don't know where that outfit is, so help me."

"Are you lying to me?"

"The last time I lied, Miss, my good old mother scrubbed my mouth with lye soap, and that broke me of lyin' forever."

"What are you doing here?"

He told her about meeting night-riders, how they had shot at him, and he told about seeing the fire and riding down to investigate.

"Then I ran into you and we have this ruckus."

She lowered the gun. She said, "I believe you, sir." She walked over and sat on a rock, the gun's barrel pointing toward the earth. "He's dead," she cried. "He's burning in his cabin."

"Who is he?"

"My neighbor. His name was Jack Maloney. He was an Irishman, and he always joked and laughed, but now he won't laugh again."

Buck was very solemn. "I'm a newcomer here, as I said. I take it there's a range-war here with this Williams' outfit trying to run out you farmers, and you are a farmer's wife?"

"I'm not married. Jack Maloney proposed to me—oh, many times—still, I liked him but didn't love him." She stopped suddenly. "I'm talking about something that I should keep secret. I guess I'm a little stunned."

"Where do you live?"

Behind them, the fire crackled; the fire talked. One side of the shack caved in and the sudden flame lighted her face even more clearly. She told him her name was Sandra Smith, and she and her father had a homestead about a mile away, and that her father was named Pete Smith. He was in Ringbone town for supplies and would come back in the morning.

"Seems to me that other farmers would come to investigate the fire," he said.

"They're afraid to leave their homes. If they do the Cross in a Circle might burn them down while they were gone."

Buck looked at the fire. There was nothing he or anybody else could do here. He said he was heading into Ringbone town and there he would report the fire to the sheriff. She told him Ringbone was not the county seat and therefore had no sheriff. There was not even a deputy in Ringbone.

"There's a town marshal—his name is Bill Jenkins—but his jurisdiction is just in Ringbone town and stops at the town's limits, which aren't far from main street."

"Why no deputy?"

"I heard that the Williams' outfit wouldn't allow the sheriff to station a deputy in town. Evidently they want no interference from the law." She brushed dust from her levis and Buck noticed her full hips. "The marshal has his hands full in town. A stranger killed one of the Cross in a Circle gunmen. The man killed was named Rudder."

"A stranger killed him, you say? What is the stranger's name?"

"A Mexican called Tortilla Joe."

Buck nodded again. So Tortilla Joe, his old partner, had gunned down a Williams' rider. . . . Further inquiry brought about the motivation for the gunfight. Buck then asked if she knew

John Powers. Powers, she said, had a homestead on Hanging Woman's Creek.

"That dirty, stinking thief!"

"What's wrong with Powers?"

"Mister, you look like a pretty square-shooter to me. I'm sorry I tried to kill you, because any man who would ride down to see if anybody was caught in a fire is a good man in my book."

"Yes, Sandra."

"But, Mister, if you're a friend of that skunk John Powers, I want nothing to do with you, understand?"

"You make it clear. But why—?"

Without answering, she mounted and rode away, dust rising behind her bronc as she loped toward her homestead.

Buck McKee scowled, then shook his head in puzzlement.

Chapter FOUR

THE MAN lay in bed stark naked. Both arms were bent so his hairy hands were touching on his hairy chest. His eyes were closed and his mouth was closed, too. His chest did not rise and fall. Big Bob Williams was dead.

With him had died the era of open and unfenced range.

Big Bob did not hear the boots moving across the floor of the big living-room with its huge rock fireplace, its smoke-blackened walls. Lamplight reflected from the silver inlay on the spurs. Lamplight reflected from the glossy shine on the boots. Lamplight showed the deep grooves in the harsh face of young Matt Williams.

"For Gawd's sake, Matt, sit down!"

The boots stopped. Matt Williams smiled cynically as he studied Ag Keller who sat in a chair, boots out ahead of him. On the table beside Keller was a quart of whiskey. The lamplight danced through the amber liquid as Keller raised the bottle and drank noisily.

"Don't hit that too hard, Ag."

"Why not?"

"Those farmers might organize and hit at us any time."

"We got guards out," Ag Keller reminded. He put the bottle on the table, wiped his mouth with his hand, and sighed. "I'd sure cotton to know who that button was who put the lead into Tony!"

"Prob'ly some farmer."

"What was he doin' out on the range so early in the mornin'?"

"Only God knows, and he can't tell. Maybe he was out rustlin' one of my Cross in a Circle steers."

"We should have fought it out with him."

"Why?"

"Well, because— Hell, he killed Tony, he did!"

"Just another hired hand with a slow gun," Matt Williams murmured. He walked to the doorway and looked at the corpse. "So the Ol' Gent with the Scythe finally knocked you down, eh, old Big Bob Williams."

Big Bob made no reply.

Matt Williams spoke again to the dead man. "I took a lot from you. You whipped me and beat me and all the time you said you were doing it for my good. You were a tough man once. At one time you were Big Bob Williams—the cattle king—and no farmer dared cross your grass. But old age slowed you down, old man."

Ag Keller watched, eyes a little sick.

Matt Williams said, "All right, Big Bob, your day is done. You caused me enough hell with your beatin's an' your preachin'. Now preach a good sermon wherever you are!" Matt's voice was hard, bitter.

Ag Keller said, "Don't bawl him out, Matt. Hell, he cain't hear you. A man is supposed to have respect for the dead."

"Respect? Why?"

"I dunno, but a man should have."

A rider came in, said, "We buried Tony, Matt. Down in the willers along the crick."

"Good riddance."

"Wonder if he left any kin we should notify?"

"Forget that. Divide his money and belongings between you. Now get to hell out of here."

The rider left.

Ag Keller said, "Wonder where the squaw went?"

"Back to her people, I guess. Anyway, if I catch her around here, I'll give her about a fifty-yard start, and then put a .30-30 bullet into her."

Ag Keller took another drink.

Matt Williams went to the barn, his chaps making rustling sounds. The rowels in his spurs talked metallically. He got a buckskin and slung up his saddle and rode away, the spur-rowels silenced against the buckskin's yellow flanks. Dawn was coming across the rangeland, tiptoeing across the

grass, and the distant cones of the Bighorns lanced upward in a vain attempt to pierce the Wyoming sunrise.

But Matt Williams had no eye for the beauty of this range. He had made his first move, and it was a move designed to hold intact a cattle kingdom; behind him, dead and stiff and on his back, lay the body of Big Bob Williams. To the east, out on the flat country, was a burned homestead shack; in that shack, burned and black, was the body of what had once been laughing Jack Maloney. The first move had been made. Others would come if the farmers did not leave their homesteads.

Without warning, he swung to the west, and within twenty minutes he rode down a slope, heading for a cabin situated down there on Hanging Woman's Creek. He rode in, his right hand high and with the palm out. Apparently the cabin was deserted. Although outwardly he was calm, inwardly there was turmoil in Matt Williams. A man could be hidden in the brush with a rifle.

A dog came out, tail wagging. Matt Williams stopped the buckskin and sat a silent saddle—a young man, big and rawboned and holding in himself his own destiny. Time gathered; the dog sat down.

Finally Williams said, "John Powers."

The brush made its sounds and a heavy-set man

of about forty stepped out. He wore a neat blue suit and he had on a clean white shirt and a bow tie. He had a heavy, thick-jowled face and his lips were too thick—they were greedy lips. Now his tongue came out and ran its thick redness across the thick lips.

"You get up early," Williams said.

Powers watched him. They were two bobcats measuring each other. Finally Powers said, "I saw a fire over toward Maloney's place. That took me into the brush. Then a while ago Sandra Smith rode by."

"A fire? Maloney's farm?"

Powers kept on watching Williams. When he spoke his voice was low and he said, "Maloney is dead. Burned to death in his cabin."

"Tough luck."

Powers asked, "What do you know about it, Williams?"

Matt Williams shrugged. "Not a thing. My men and me were home all night. The old man died last night. I'm ridin' to town to make grave preparations now. Thought I'd swing over and see you."

"About what?"

Williams looked at the farmer. "Powers, you're playing a game here, and I can't savvy just what it is. Of course these farmers pay you for locating

them on homesteads. You make money there. But it looks to me like there's something else behind this."

"You got a strong imagination."

"You locate farmers on land you know damned well won't raise crops. They pay you and then they start to starve to death. I understand that farmer over on Warm Butte left the other day."

"He did."

"Heard he sold his homestead right to you?"

"He did."

"What do you aim to do with them?"

"That," said Jim Powers, "is my business, Williams."

Williams smiled a little. He did not understand this well-dressed man. Powers rode a bronc like a saddleman should ride a horse, but still he did not dress like a cowpuncher—or a farmer, either. He was working his own farm but his hands were not doing the work. He had a hired man.

"Maybe," said Williams, "we could work together?"

Powers shook his head, eyes lusterless. "You're only fishing for information. You can't work with me and I can't work with you. Both of us have a little too much greed and danged too much ambition. We'd clash."

"We're clashing now."

Powers nodded. "Maloney's house didn't burn by accident. Maloney never accidentally got caught in the fire."

"What can you prove?"

Powers spread his well-kept hands. "Nothing, Matt Williams. Absolutely nothing. Now I own Maloney's farm. He had a stipulation in his homestead entry that, in case of death, his farm reverts to me."

"You copper your bets. You lack in one department, though."

"And that?"

"Guns, farmer, guns!"

Powers showed a thin smile. "I have guns," he assured. "I have two fast gunmen on my side."

"Who are they?"

"That," said Powers, "is my business. You've had your say. Now ride on about your business, Matt Williams."

Williams sat a silent saddle for a long moment. Their eyes met and locked and each probed the other and each read nothing. Then Williams sighed, and the sigh was not one of resignation, it was one of suppressed anger. And Williams said, "Big Bob is dead. So now I own the Cross in a Circle. No farmer squats on our graze. I'll look at you through the smoke of a gun. Remember that. If your game is worth-while I'll let you play in with me."

"I play a lone hand."

"Just remember Big Bob isn't alive now to hold me back."

"I judged he was dead. There was fire in the sky last night."

Williams turned the buckskin and rode away. He was big in his saddle, his back was toward John Powers; his back had a tender cold spot. Powers was ruthless and Powers had his game, and Williams knew that a bullet can kill a man from behind as readily as it can from his front. Still, he put his back toward the dude farmer, and Powers watched and noticed this, and inside him arose a grudging admiration.

Williams rode over the hill and the hill rose and cut him from Powers' view. Williams lifted the buckskin with his spurs, and dust trailed upward. He had made a bid against John Powers, and each had tested the other, and who had come out second best?

For some reason, he had the unhappy feeling that John Powers had out-bested him, for he had gone to see Powers with a compromise, and Powers had not come to him. This thought was not good. He was the son of the cattle baron, and he had thousands of head of cattle, and he was wealthy. He had gone to compromise with a dirt farmer, and the farmer had rebuffed him.

Anger welled up, touching his high cheekbones.

Anger was with him when he rode into Ringbone town. He went down an alley and dismounted behind the Broken Boot Café. Here was a one room house, set apart by a small picket fence, and he opened and closed the gate, glancing down at the wild flowers that grew along the base of the fence. He went up the gravel walk, listening to the sound of his boots. He knocked on the door three times.

"Mildred?"

"What do you want, Matt?"

"What do I want?" Savagery was in his voice. "I want to talk to you, of course. The Old Man is dead."

"Oh, heavens."

The door opened and he entered. She wore a dressing robe and she was about twenty-two—she was blonde and slim and lovely. She had just got out of bed and the room held the sweet secret aroma of a woman. He noticed this, and his blood quickened.

"Your dad—he's dead?"

He put his arm around her and held her close. "We didn't come to talk about the old fool." He put his hand on her chin and lifted her lips. She evaded his mouth.

"Matt, please go. People will talk."

"Let the damned fools talk. I want you. And I'll have you, Mildred!"

Her blue eyes held tears. "You want me, Matt, but you don't love me. You have a wife, and her name is Ambition. Now please, Matt, let me go, and please leave my house."

His lips came down, crushed hers.

For a moment, then, she fought against him, her full body wiry and strong under the thin dressing robe. Then she went slack and her body pressed against his, and her lips, despite her efforts, met and blended with his.

After a while she said, "I love you, Matt."

He said nothing.

She said, "And I hate you, Matt."

Chapter FIVE

Buck McKee ate breakfast at the Broken Boot Café. He got a seat early, right after the Chinese cook had opened, and the cook grumbled and swore back in his kitchen. Finally he came out with a stack of hotcakes and the trimmings.

Buck tied into the grub. He was cleaning his plate when a young man entered. He was well-dressed and his wide shoulders showed his arrogance. He gave Buck a long raking glance, then took a stool.

"Coffee, Wong."

"Name no Wong. Name is Charlie."

"Trot out some coffee, Wong."

The Chinaman poured coffee. The young buckaroo cradled the warm cup between his big hands and looked at Buck. He studied Buck with a calm scrutiny. Buck looked at him but the man did not look away. Buck got the impression that this man was eyeing him for a definite reason. The man's gaze, probing and brazen, angered the cowpuncher a little.

"Figure you'll know me the next time you see me?" Buck asked.

"I'm Matt Williams."

Buck remembered Sandra Smith's conversation. So this was Matt Williams, son of the old curly wolf himself, eh?

"The name," said Buck McKee, "means nothing to me."

"I own the Cross in a Circle."

"Still means nothing." Buck dug in his levis for change. "How much are the damages, Charlie?"

"Thirty-five cent, cowboy."

Buck paid, said, "Good chuck." The back door opened and he could see who entered because he could see over the swinging door that led to the kitchen. She was a beauty just as Sandra was a beauty. But where Sandra was full-bodied and dark, this girl was light-haired and thinner. She wore a white uniform and her golden hair hung to her shoulders.

"Hello, Miss Mildred," the cook said.

"How are you this morning, Charlie?"

The girl came behind the counter, saw Matt Williams, said, "What do you want for breakfast, Matt?" She did not await an answer. She spoke to Charlie. "Big Bob Williams died last night, Charlie."

"Big Bob—he die?"

"That's right, Chink." Matt Williams spoke abruptly. "The old man kicked the bucket. I own the Cross in a Circle now."

Charlie regarded Matt Williams with thoughtful Oriental eyes, but he said nothing. Buck picked up his change and a toothpick and was loathe to depart for he had learned much from this conversation. He turned to go and Matt Williams said, rather harshly, "Mister, what's your business in this town?"

Buck turned, toothpick jutting. "You speakin' to me, fella?"

"I am."

Buck studied him. Coldly Matt Williams returned the cowpuncher's stare. Buck McKee decided he did not like this arrogant young rooster.

"My business," said Buck McKee, "is my concern and nobody else's."

"You a farmer?"

"I'm not."

"There's only one cow outfit that uses this town as a base, cowboy. That's my Cross in a Circle spread. The other big outfit close is about sixty miles north, on the Little Big Horn. I could hire you if you handle a fast gun. Can you do that?"

"I've never had anybody time me," Buck said, and coldly walked out.

The morning air was still cool. But soon the sun would get higher and dump heat on this rangeland. Buck felt a little angry. Trouble had heaped up on him with a suddenness. He had ridden into a range he had thought a peaceful range. Out of

the night riders had come and guns had talked. He had seen fire and death, and he had held Sandra Smith in his arms. Tortilla Joe had killed a man—a Cross in a Circle gunman—and big Matt Williams had brushed his fur in the wrong direction. John Powers' letter had pulled him into trouble, and, in the letter, Powers had not mentioned trouble. He had just invited him down for a spell, an old friend writing to another, asking him to drop in for a visit.

Had John Powers pulled him into trouble?

Well, soon he'd meet Tortilla Joe, and the Mexican would tell him much for, according to Sandra Smith, Tortilla Joe had been some days loafing around this burg called Ringbone.

Where was Tortilla Joe now?

The hour was early. Saloons and store were not yet open. An old man, evidently the swamper, was sweeping the board walk in front of a saloon, and Buck got him into a conversation, telling him that Matt Williams had brought into town the news that his father, Big Bob Williams, had died in the night.

"Kinda figgered he'd kick the bucket soon. Wonder what was wrong with him? Somethin' inside of him jes' seemed to eat him up."

"You knew him purty well?"

The old man spat. "As well as any man knew him, I reckon, an' that weren't very well. Big Bob

always was stand-offish an' he never made friends with no man, just made acquaintances. Wonder what'll become of his squaw."

"Who is she?"

"Crow squaw named Many Feathers. Ol' Bob had three wives legally, an' he loved Many Feathers more'n any of his white women, 'peared to me. Matt has prob'ly run her off. He hates her."

"Who's that purty blonde girl down at the Broken Boot beanery?"

"She's Mildred James. Raised an' born here. Her father died about two years ago, an' her mother went afore her dad, an' she runs the café herself. They say Matt Williams would like to hook up with her."

"She's missin' a chance to hook onto some money, eh?"

"Millie don't care about dinero. She's as independent as a hog on ice. Mister, you ask a lot of questions for a stranger. You all lookin' for somebody aroun' here?"

"Yes, a Mex."

"The one thet kilt Sig Rudder?"

"The same."

Rheumy old eyes studied him. "You aim to take up Sig Rudder's cause, maybe? You be one of his kinfolk, perhaps?"

"I aim to see that Mexican," Buck said mysteriously.

"You 'pear to be a right nice young feller," the swamper said. "I'd sure kinda hate to see thet Mex kill you."

"He won't kill me."

"He's a fast hand with his six-shooter. I'm warnin' you in advance, mister."

"Where can I find him?"

A scraggly hand made a gesture toward the southern hills. "He's somewhere out thataway. Got a camp out there, I reckon."

Buck looked toward the hills. They started about a mile from Ringbone town, then rose a few thousand feet before settling down and becoming benchland. They were dotted with pine and spruce and thick buckbrush. They covered only about half a million acres, he judged.

"I'll find him out there," he said.

He went to his bronc tied to the hitchrail in front of the Broken Boot Café. His horse was tired; his flanks were thin; he had been ridden many miles. The bronc needed grass and oats and a rest. Buck was unwrapping the rawhide bridle reins from around the teeth-gnawed pinepole rack when big Matt Williams came out of the cafe. The owner of the Cross in a Circle stopped and looked at him mount.

"Leaving town, eh?"

"Pullin' out."

Williams nodded. "You show good judgment. I could use a gundog, but I can't use you—we'd never get along. You're bullheaded and so am I."

Buck nodded. "Said correct, friend. I never did cotton to taking orders, even from a woman."

"We're alike in thet respect, stranger."

Mildred James watched through the window. Buck's eyes met hers and she looked at Matt Williams.

Buck rode off at a lope and headed for the south hills. He made a mental summation of the facts he had learned since coming to Ringbone. He had met Matt Williams. The toughness of the man was easily apparent. Mixed with this toughness was a shrewdness that told of an active and strong mind. Matt Williams would be a tough foe.

Pumpkin-rollers had moved in on Williams' range. Range he claimed through squatter's rights, range to which he had no deeds. Farmers had come in with barbwire and plows and discs. Buck did not like farmers. He was a saddleman, first and last and always; he had always made his living on horseback. Any man who could walk for miles and miles a day behind a walking-plow was, to put it mildly, a little crazy. Plows tore up the roots of buffalo grass. Then the wind came along

and blew the topsoil away because there were no roots to hold it.

But where did John Powers fit into this? Sandra Smith had said John Powers had a homestead, and that the homestead was located on a creek called Hanging Woman's Creek. Powers had been a cowpuncher up in Montana. Powers, being a homesteader, would be opposed to Matt Williams, and that meant trouble. Buck frowned and decided that Tortilla Joe would be loaded down with information about this deal.

Tortilla Joe had been summoned onto Ringbone range by John Powers too. Then why was not the Mexican at the Powers' farm? Why did he bed-down out here in the hills? Or was the old swamper wrong? Was Tortilla Joe at the Powers' farm?

Buck knew that Tortilla Joe, if he were in these hills, would be awake by this time. He climbed a ridge and looked across the tumbling expanse of Wyoming range, searching for a telltale whisp of smoke that would reveal the location of the Mexican's camping grounds. But the blue morning sky showed no smoke.

Finally he decided that the old man had been wrong, so he turned his tired pony. He headed for the general direction of John Powers' farm. He was riding along a coulee trail when a voice spoke from the brush.

"My ol' *amigo*, Buck McKees, no?"

Buck laughed. "Tortilla Joe, come out of the brush an' let me look at you, you old wart-hog!"

"I comes out, Buck."

Chapter SIX

THEY RODE toward John Powers' farm.

Tortilla Joe said, "For about seex months I no see you, pardner. When we spleet up in Salt Lake the Ceety, I go over aroun' Rawlins, down south, an' I punch the cows for the Rockeeng Chair outfeet."

"How did Powers know where you were?"

"Me, I dunno that." Tortilla Joe shrugged heavy shoulders. "But I get the letters from heem, an' he ask about you, an' I tell heem you up north in Montana, an' so he write to you, too?"

"He did."

"Now what he want?"

Buck spat and said, "I don't savvy it, pard. You played it wise. You looked the ground over before you made a play."

"I feeger you be along soon, Buck. I no want to get into trouble without you to help me."

Buck smiled. "Nice and considerate of you, Tortilla. But it 'pears to me you got in trouble with a gent named Rudder, even before I came."

"Who she tell you that?"

Buck told about meeting the night-riders, how

they had exchanged shots, and he told about meeting Miss Sandra Smith. "I got her down and sat on her even before we were introduced," he said, smiling.

"Very eempolite," Tortilla Joe said. He took a small bundle out of his saddlebag. "Me, I have not had the breakfast yet."

Buck watched him unroll a tortilla and sink his white teeth into it. Who, in this northern section of Wyoming, knew how to make a Mexican tortilla? He then learned about Margarita at the Spoon and Fork Café.

"Maybe I marries her," Tortilla Joe said, and sighed.

Hurriedly Buck McKee turned his head and studied his Latin saddlepal. "Tortilla, your talk hurts me, fella. You're always going to marry some woman. Then, in about a week, you get tired of her and want to pull out, but she doesn't get tired of you—and we're both in a heck of a fix."

"I no get tired of Margarita."

Buck said, "Let's talk sense. Let's talk about this Powers fellow. Heck, I haven't seen him for ten years or so, not since you an' me an' him punched cows on the Milk River up in Montana."

"He cowboy then."

"He was a good one, too."

Tortilla Joe chewed his tortilla. His jaws

cracked down on the brittle crust. He finally swallowed. "He no cowboy now."

"No, he's a farmer, they tell me."

"No farmer, either."

Buck glanced at his partner.

Tortilla Joe said, "He dress beeg all the time. New suits, an' he no wear boots—he wear shoes, all polished."

"He must look like heck follerin' a plow in that regalia."

"He no follow the plow. He hire a mans to do that. He no do nothin', I tells you, Buck."

Buck pulled in his bronc. "Wait a minute. You're shootin' too fast at me."

Tortilla Joe emphasized his words with gestures that became rather violent. "Powers, he ees workeeng some scheme, Buck. He needs two gunmens, so he sends for us. He has changed a lot. He used to be a cowboy; now he ees the beezness man, always dressed nice. He ees now a sleecker."

"I never did trust him too much," Buck had to admit. "He wrote and told me you and a bunch of his old friends—gents we used to punch cows with all over the West—would hold a reunion here. I figured I'd look you up an' we'd head over across the mountains into Utah an' ride winter-herd for ol' Marty Enright an' his Broken Leg outerfit an' winter there. Marty always sets a good table and he always treats a man right, too."

"He write same to me, too."

"Any of the other boys show up?"

"None of them. An' I tells you why, Buck. He no write to them. He want us, because of our guns."

"Shag us into somethin', eh? Well, let's see what he's got to say for himself, before we condemn him too far into perdition."

The rest of the ride was made in silence. Buck and Tortilla had been friends more years than each could remember and both were glad to be back together again, although neither would admit it. Both rode poor, trail-tired horses. Horses that needed a rest. If they pulled out for Utah they would need fresh broncs or, if they did not trade or buy other horses, they would have to take it easy. Buck rode high on his stirrups, angular body braced on his hands that were flat on the cantle of his old saddle. This way, some of the weight was off his stirrups, and distributed onto the bronc's shoulders, not his back.

Tortilla Joe's horse, having had a few days of rest, had regained a few pounds of flesh, but he also showed signs of fatigue. The Mexican rode solid in his saddle, bouncing with each step of his cayuse, his arms flapping. Buck gave him a glance, and then, being a practical man, he shoved questions out of his mind, and gave himself over to the contemplation of his environment.

They had left the benchland and were now on the flat country that bordered each bank of Ringbone Creek. The little cowtown was slightly west of them, back toward the hills that, in turn, arose and became the Big Horn Mountains. The farmers were, with a few exceptions, located on the north bank of Ringbone Creek. Hanging Woman's Creek, where John Powers had his homestead, angled in from the northwest, and entered Ringbone Creek a mile or so below the town of Ringbone.

"Yonder, Buck, ees the Cross in a Circle *rancho*."

Tortilla Joe pointed toward the west. Buck looked and said, "I can't see no buildings."

"They are behind the hills from you."

Buck said, "I don't give a damn where the outfit is. If John Powers has lied to us, I'm workin' the son over with my fists."

"I weel beat you to heem."

"My meat," Buck said. "If he's jobbed us, God help him!"

"He tough mans."

"I can take him. First, we'll give him a chance to talk, though. That's his place up there ahead, ain't it?"

"That house she ees hees."

Powers had built a nice house in the cottonwood trees. Most of the farmers built of native

log because they were too poor to buy lumber. But John Powers had built a rambling house of lumber and it was painted a neat light green. It had nice out-buildings and, in fact, was quite a spread.

"He must have some dinero," Buck grunted.

"He buys up the farmers' lands when they pull out. Soon thing you know he weel own the valley."

"Where did he get all this money?"

"Me, I dunnos."

A collie barked as they rode into the yard and John Powers came out of the house. He was immaculately dressed and he shook hands with each. Then he invited them into the house. Buck entered a big living room that had new rugs and a new carpet, and the furniture, also, was new. The place was immaculate.

"You married now, John?" Buck joked.

"Have one of the farmers' daughters come in and clean. Her name is Sandra Smith, and she lives a few miles from here."

Buck nodded, face deadpan. For some reason he didn't like the idea that Sandra was a charwoman for this man. Tortilla Joe had made an understatement when he had claimed that Powers had changed. He was a cowpuncher no longer; now he was a businessman, brusque and active.

"Have some coffee, men?"

"If you can spike mine," Buck said.

They sat around the table watching each other. Buck stirred his coffee with his forefinger but John Powers stirred his with a silver spoon. Tortilla Joe sipped with a noisy sucking sound. Powers scowled a little and glanced at the Latin who did not see his glance. But Buck did and felt a little angry.

"Where are the rest of the boys?" Buck asked suddenly.

"They'll be along soon, I guess."

"I been here for four days or so," Tortilla Joe said.

Again Powers sent a displeased glance toward the Mexican. "So I heard," he murmured. "Why didn't you look me up when you came on this range? Why bat around out in the hills instead of riding over here where I had good chuck and a good bed for you?"

"Me, I waits for Buck."

"Heard you killed Sig Rudder?"

Tortilla Joe shook his head dolefully. "Me, I no want to kill him. He make me keel heem."

"Good riddance," John Powers said. "Hope you kill more of those Williams' scissor-bills."

That sentence, hotly spoken, clarified all doubts that might have been in Buck's mind, and he knew now, for certain, that he and Tortilla Joe had been tricked into coming into Ringbone.

Powers wanted gundogs. This thought brought anger to him but he kept it from his voice.

"Powers," he said, "what's your game?"

"I don't follow you, Buck."

Buck stood up. He leaned forward and pounded the table. "Don't put on a dumb act for me, Powers. You ain't gonna have no ol'time cowboy reunion. You want two gunmen, an' you figured that if me an' Tortilla Joe showed up, you'd have those gunmen. Well, here we are."

Powers leaned back and hooked his thumbs in his vest. "McKee, you're taking this rather seriously, ain't you?"

Tortilla Joe watched, black eyes brittle beads of curiosity.

Buck said, "Well, what's your game? Spit it out!"

Powers got to his feet. He walked the length of the room, turned, looked at them; his smile was paper-thin.

"Yes, McKee, I need gunmen. I tricked you two into coming on Ringbone range." John Powers raised his hand to cut off Buck's words. "Don't get hot under the collar until we talk further. How would you like to make fifty bucks a week? That adds up to two hundred a month. And found."

Tortilla Joe had to grunt.

Buck's eyes narrowed. The most he had ever drawn in wages was fifty per month. Most of the

time he and Tortilla Joe worked for twenty or thirty bucks a month. Now this man—this former cowpuncher—was offering him fifty bucks a week! Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican's mouth was open in surprise.

"Close your mug, Tortilla. You'll catch a fly."

Tortilla's mouth snapped shut.

Buck spoke to John Powers. "A gunman, eh?"

"Gunhand wages."

Buck said, "Against the Cross in a Circle spread?"

"Right."

"This land ain't worth that much," Buck said. "There's lots of farming land that's much better for the plow. Where did you get all this dinero and what's behind your wantin' this land? There's more behind it than making a farm out of it all."

"You read something into it that's not there. I want these farms and I'll get them. These farmers are just stooges for me. I'm fighting two forces here. I'm fighting to get these farmers out so they will sell deeds to me. I'm fighting the Williams' spread, too. Only the farmers don't know I'm fighting them on the quiet. They think I'm their friend."

Buck remembered Sandra Smith's hot words about John Powers. One farmer surely did not trust Powers. He said nothing, though.

"How about it, McKee?"

"Not for me," Buck said.

Powers turned sharp eyes on Tortilla Joe. "And you, Tortilla?"

"Buck rides out. Me, I rides weeth heem."

"Three hundred per month."

"No."

"No."

"Three fifty?"

Buck said, "Not for me."

"Nor me, either."

Powers spread his hands. "I'll make it four hundred. I'll go no higher. That's a lot of dough."

Buck said, "Well, now—" and he moved closer. Powers smiled, thinking the lanky cowpuncher had reconsidered. Powers moved close to shake hands. But Buck said, "Mister, put up your fists, 'cause I aim to beat the hell outa you for trickin' us!"

Powers snarled, his fist lashed out.

Chapter SEVEN

WHEN THE SQUAW left the Cross in a Circle, she walked across the starlit hills and headed for Pete Smith's farm. She liked Sandra Smith and she wanted to talk to somebody; Sandra had talked to her once or twice in Ringbone town when the Indian woman had ridden in with Big Bob Williams in the buckboard for supplies. The rest of the white women would not speak to her, even though she was Big Bob's squaw; Sandra, though, had talked with her.

Matt Williams' boot had given her a bloody nose and the right side of her face was swollen. He had kicked her hard. She hated Matt Williams with the same degree of emotion that she had loved his father. She carried a sack of grub, and she had a Winchester .30-30 rifle. Her thinking was rather limited and the sudden turn of events had disturbed her mental equilibrium.

She had wanted to give Big Bob a good funeral, but now that was impossible—for Matt had run her off the Cross in a Circle. She could go back to her people, but they would not accept her wholeheartedly—she had left her tribe to travel

with the pale faces; she had been a white man's squaw. She did not know just what to do next. First, she would talk with Sandra Smith.

Within her aching breast was a demand that she get even with Matt Williams. Gingerly her dark thick fingers went up to touch her swollen jaw. Her jaw would be swollen and sore for weeks and she would have a black eye. But the pain in her face fell far short of the intensity of her inner turmoil. Big Bob, her bulwark, was gone; he was cold clay, and the earth would soon claim him. . . . She could go no further. She stopped, put down her rifle and pack-bag, and she sat beside a rock on a hillside, and she wept as only broken-hearted women can weep—this had run on for day after day, and Big Bob had lain there sick, and now it was all over. And so she wept.

Finally she slept, and when she wakened, it was dawn. She did not remember falling asleep. She had been dead-tired. Night after night she had nursed Big Bob Williams, and utter fatigue —a deadly tiredness—had been in her. Now sleep had somewhat pushed back that weariness. But it was still in her—deep in the marrow of her bones, in her tissues, in her blood. Only Time and rest and forgetfulness would erase that fatigue.

She stood up, and looked at the basin below. There was a fire down below her. She knew,

immediately, that Matt Williams and his riders had burned a nester's outfit, and she knew that the outfit had belonged to a man named Jack Maloney. She had seen Maloney once in Ringbone town. Big Bob had pointed out the Irishman for her. She had liked his clean-cut, almost boyish face; the confident manner he had assumed. She knew that Maloney was dead. She lifted dark eyes to the sky. . . .

Matt would turn his valley into a valley of raw red hell.

There was still the dogged determination to see Sandra Smith. So she went again toward the Smith farm. When she came into the yard Pete Smith came out of the house with a rifle. He was a thin, unshaven man—a homely man with a crooked nose. He said, "You're Big Bob Williams' woman, ain't you?"

"Big Bob, he dead."

Pete Smith turned and looked toward Maloney's farm. "Now I savvy the fire," he murmured. "So now Matt Williams owns the Cross in a Circle." He seemed to be talking to himself.

"Where your daughter?"

"She rode toward the fire."

The squaw shook her heavy head with dour slowness. "She should not do that. Matt he find her. Matt he mean man. He kick me in the face

and do this to me." She touched her black-and-blue cheek.

"He'd best not lay a hand on my girl."

"I wait for her. I wanna see her."

"Come inside."

"No, I wait here."

The squaw sank to the soil and sat cross-legged in the dust of the yard. Pete Smith again invited her into the house, again got a no for an answer, and then he walked up the slope, carrying his rifle. When Sandra rode in she saw Many Feathers and she dismounted and ran to her.

"Many Feathers, what are you doing here? And what happened to your face?"

She told the dark-haired girl what had happened.

Pete Smith said, "You can't stay here, squaw."

"Why not?" Sandra challenged.

"We got enough trouble as it is. Matt hates this squaw. If he finds out she's at our shack he'll hit at us to get at her!"

"We'll defend her!"

Pete Smith looked at his daughter, then turned his faded blue eyes on Many Feathers. The squaw was looking at the ground. Apparently she was reaching a mental decision. Many Feathers stood up.

"I go," she said. "I see your side, Mister Smith.

I no want to get friends into trouble." She looked at Sandra. "Where is the Mexican?"

Sandra was puzzled. "What Mexican?"

"The one he kill Sig Rudder, the dirty thief!"

"Oh, the one they call Tortilla Joe. Why, I don't know where he is. He was around town yesterday. Margarita would know. She's sweet on him."

"She sweet on every mans. I ask her."

Pete Smith looked at his daughter. "I don't understand about this," the farmer admitted.

"Neither do I, Dad."

Many Feathers said, "Tortilla Joe, he enemy of Matt Williams. He kill Rudder, and Rudder he top gunman for Matt. Matt never let that Mexican ride out of Ringbone valley alive."

"You think he won't?" Sandra asked.

"I know he no let him. If he let him get away free then the rule of Matt will be busted."

Pete Smith bit off a chew of Horseshoe. "By golly, daughter, I believe she is right, at that. It makes logic. Matt is awful proud. He made the boast that Sig Rudder was the fastest man he had with a gun. Tortilla Joe knocked Rudder into Kingdom Come with a bullet. Tortilla Joe is marked in Matt Williams' book."

"That right," Many Feathers said.

Sandra asked, "You intend to join forces with Tortilla Joe?"

"I do that."

"Do you need some supplies?"

"I got shells for rifle an' I got grub in sack," the squaw said.

Sandra's girlish face had a look of doubt. "I don't like this one bit," she stated positively. "Dad, she can stay here."

"Well, all right, daughter."

But Many Feathers shook her head. "Your father he right first time. I fight from brush. Mexican no want me, I fight alone."

There was hate in her voice—steely, grating hate. This registered on Sandra and drew color out of her face; it made Pete Smith grim and uncertain, for he had never heard any woman, white or Indian, speak with such hate.

The farmer turned and went to the house.

Many Feathers walked away.

Sandra watched her go, then caught her. "You can't go on foot, Many Feathers. You can have my horse. I can't let you go away on foot."

"I take horse, but I bring him back some time. I no take the saddle; just the horse."

"You can have a saddle, too."

"I ride bareback."

When Many Feathers made up her mind, apparently she would not change it. She would not take a saddle. Sandra helped her mount the raw-boned old horse and then handed the squaw the

rifle and her sack of grub. Many Feathers guided the bronc with a rope tied around his lower jaw. She made a ludicrous figure on the horse, but Sandra, if she noticed this fact, did not show it.

"I bring horse back soon."

"You be careful, and you watch yourself."

"Matt, he out to kill me."

Pete Smith came out of the house and stood beside his daughter.

"You women sure can wreck a man's days." He spoke with a sourness. "If it ain't a white woman, it's a redskin. Sometimes I figger I'm lucky."

"Why lucky?"

"Your mother done run off with that steamfitter back in Ohio a few years back," he reminded, the sourness still in his voice.

"Dad, you shouldn't talk that way!"

"What happened at the fire? We was so busy arguin' with that redskin I never got to ask you about Maloney. I figger Maloney's dead."

"He burned in the fire."

"Matt Williams is a wild man now that his dad is dead."

She told about meeting Buck McKee. Pete Smith chewed and spat and watched Many Feathers ride off into the early morning. He remembered the harsh undertone in the squaw's words. . . .

Many Feathers rode into Ringbone town.

Margarita was cooking at the Spoon and Fork. Margarita perspired and almost snarled at the Indian. No, she did not know where Tortilla Joe was. He didn't have sense enough to even come to town for a good supper of frijoles and enchiladas, complete with mescal. She hated all men right now.

"Why do you want to see my man, Indian?"

"I want to tell him something about Matt," the squaw lied. Margarita had had too much jealousy in her voice.

"You tell me. I'll tell him. I don't want no woman foolin' aroun' with my man, savvy?"

"You loco. I no see him."

"You'd better not try to shine up to him."

With difficulty Many Feathers remounted. Margarita watched her from the back window. Many Feathers did not ride toward the south, for she figured Margarita would be watching her; she left town toward the north, apparently heading back for the Cross in a Circle. Once out of Margarita's sight, she swung around Ringbone to the west, and headed for the southern hills.

She missed Tortilla Joe. She rode too far to the west. Tortilla Joe saw her through his field glasses but he, of course, did not know she was looking for him. He did not even recognize her as being Big Bob Williams' squaw.

He had heard that Big Bob had a squaw, but he had never met her. Then he had dismissed the redskin from his mind, for his field glasses had picked up Buck McKee heading toward the hills.

And he had ridden down to meet his own partner.

Chapter EIGHT

TORTILLA JOE had seen Buck McKee in a number of fights before, both gun fights and fist fights. He had seen him administer some terrible beatings with his fists. He had seen Buck take plenty of punishment, too. But never had he seen his partner deal out such punishment as Buck handed to John Powèrs.

When Powers hit, he intended to smash home the first blow by trickery, but his trickery did not work. Buck McKee ducked and the man's fist went over his head. Powers walked into Buck's left hook. And a savage hook it was, curving in and hitting Powers in the belly.

"You gets heem, Buck!" Tortilla Joe yelled.

Buck dimly heard his partner's cheering words. Powers was dressed like a soft city man, but he was no dude. Any man who could take a left hook like the one that Buck handed out, and then come back the way Powers came back—that man was not soft. Buck knew then he had a fight on his hands.

Anger was a savage fire in Buck, burning with a brittle flame. He controlled this anger, though—

coldness would win this fight, and blinding anger would lose it. John Powers had tricked him into riding into Ringbone Valley. He had tricked Tortilla Joe, too. Powers had put them both into danger without taking the courtesy to advise them, ahead of time, that danger awaited them. His trickery was dirty, underhanded, and unforgivable because they'd once been friends.

Buck took some punishment in return. They knocked down the table, and dishes and pots went sliding down with a loud clatter. Buck got his boot in a cooking pot, and his boot stuck. He kicked to get the pot off his boot. Just then Powers nailed him with a hard hook.

Buck went down.

Tortilla Joe said, "I gets heem!" and started forward. He was crouched and he looked like a bear waddling ahead.

"This is my fight!" Buck gritted, and he pulled the Mexican back.

Tortilla Joe hit the wall. "All right, you takes heem, then," he conceded.

And Buck took him.

John Powers lay on the floor. He wasn't a pretty sight. Buck had broken his nose, Powers' left ear was ripped partly loose, and one eye would soon be swollen shut. He lay on his side and he spat blood. He panted like a wind-broken old work horse. He did not look up at Buck.

"McKee, I'll kill you for this!"

"I'm a hard gent to kill," Buck reminded. To Tortilla Joe he said, "Pick up all the weapons you can find. This gent might try to shoot us from behind as we ride out."

"I get hees revolver an' hees rifles, Buck."

Buck went outside and washed in the horse-trough. He had absorbed some tough ones, and his head reeled. The cold water helped restore his equilibrium. He had given John Powers what he had asked for. He looked at his skinned knuckles. Slowly he opened and closed his hands. His knuckles would be stiff for some days. Stiff and sore, but not as sore as John Powers' face.

Tortilla Joe came out, carrying a rifle and a pistol. "I laid the rifle barrel across hees skull," he said, grinning like a monkey. "He ees asleep for a while, no?"

"Rider comin'," Buck grunted.

The rider was a short, heavy-set man with an ugly face. He rode a blue roan that toted the Cross in a Circle brand on his right shoulder. Dull eyes moved off Buck McKee and settled on Tortilla Joe.

"The old Mex gunslinger hisself, eh?" He purred the words nastily.

Buck asked, "Who are you, fella?"

The dull eyes switched back to Buck McKee. "Not that it's a danged bit of your bizness, fella,

what my handle is, but I'll tell you you are talkin' to Ag Keller, who works for the Williams' iron."

Tortilla Joe said, "You a pal of Sig Rudder, no? I see you an' Rudder een town together oncet."

"Right you are, spic."

Ag Keller's voice was purringly insulting. The word spic registered and made blood flush the Mexican's big jowls.

Buck murmured, "Ride a tight saddle, chum." His eyes lifted to meet those of Ag Keller. "I'm Buck McKee. This Mexican and me are partners. A man hit at him, he has me to tangle with, too; if he hits me an' whups me, partner, that Mex will tangle with him."

"Real chummy, eh?"

Buck said, "What are you doin' here, Keller?"

Keller said, "Done heard a lot of noise in the cabin, so rode down to investigate. From the looks of your mug, McKee, I'd say that John Powers got the best of you."

"You ain't seen Powers yet," Buck corrected.

Tortilla Joe said, "We rides, Buck."

They started for their broncs. But Ag Keller's words stopped them for a moment longer.

"When did you ride into this range, McKee?"

"Last night."

"From which direction?"

Buck said, "That's my bizness."

Keller said, quietly, "It might be my bizness, and the bizness of Matt Williams, savvy."

"How so?"

Keller jabbed a thumb toward Tortilla Joe. "This Mex pard of your'n shot down a Cross in a Circle man. Williams ain't forgettin' that. Big Bob Williams is dead, and Matt rods the iron now. Orders are for the Mex to be killed. He's run against Matt, and he ain't leavin' Ringbone Valley alive. Them is Matt's orders."

Tortilla Joe had a grimy hand on his holstered gun. "Maybe, Meester Keller, you want to try your hand, no?"

Ag Keller showed a ghost of a smile. "Not against the two of you, spic. Maybe later. . . ." He looked at Buck McKee. "There's trouble here, McKee. Last night one of the nester's shacks accidentally caught fire. Nester burned in it. Last night, too, one of the Cross in the Circle riders got killed."

Buck played dumb. "Killed? Horse fall on him or somethin'?"

Keller shook his heavy head. "Hosses don't shoot guns. This fella was shot out of saddle in the night."

Buck remembered the riders sweeping down on him. He remembered the flat wicked stab of his .45 and he remembered the rider sagging against the saddle's fork as they thundered on.

Keller was accusing him of killing this man. But Buck McKee kept his face deadpan.

"I don't foller you," he said.

"You ride in from the north, eh?"

"South," Buck said.

Their eyes met. Their eyes held. And in Ag Keller's eyes Buck read a slow cynicism.

"This rider came from the north," Keller murmured. "He shot an' killed a man named Tony."

"I dunno him, Keller."

Keller turned his bronc, said, "Matt Williams is blockin' the trails out of Ringbone. Nobody is gettin' out without Matt's permission. This valley is ringed in with Cross in a Circle steel."

Buck said, "A man could gun his way through."

"He might. Then again he might not."

Keller lifted his blue roan and loped away, the horse's steel hoofs savage against the Wyoming soil. Buck went to saddle and Tortilla Joe mounted. Carrying the weapons that belonged to John Powers, they loped down Ringbone Creek. Both, for some reason, were silent. They came to a grove of cottonwood trees that spread a cool blanket of shade. Cross in the Circle cattle had bedded down in these trees. They were good blooded cows with strong calves. The Hereford strain had been mixed with that of the Longhorn and the result was a cow with stamina for the hard

Wyoming winters and with good foraging ability.

Buck said, "We rest our broncs."

Their horses breathed deeply, and the saddles creaked as the broncs' ribs rose and fell.

"Keller, he feegure you keel Tony," Tortilla Joe said.

"I killed him. He shot at me and I shot back."

"Matt Weeliams, he no like you either, now. He no like me from the time I shoots the Seeg Rudder."

"Troubled grass," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe dug out a tortilla. Carefully he unwrapped it. "You want one, Buck?"

"Not now."

"Good. More for me, then."

"You make a lot of noise chewin' one of them things. Sounds like a hog crackin' corn with his back teeth."

"They good."

Buck said, "Brother, we're in trouble. We thought we were going on a picnic, and I really mean that—an old timers' reunion. Instead it's a gunsmoke party. We don't have the best luck in the world."

"We don't have the worst, either. We're alive an' full of hell an' full of tortillas."

Buck said, "We could drift out."

Tortilla Joe shook his head, cheeks bulging.

"They would turn us back or keel us. Both of us have crossed the Matt Weeliams. We come to veesit ol' friends, and now we have no friends at all."

"That's right."

Tortilla Joe chewed noisily. He blew his nose violently. He wiped his eyes with a bandanna. Buck let his bronc rest and he gave this some thought. Powers was against him, and Williams was against him. And Ringbone Valley was ringed with guns against him and his partner.

And they hadn't done anything to anybody. Of course, he had killed Tony, but that had been in self-defense. Yes, and Tortilla Joe had got rid of Rudder; also, in self-defense.

He had had one bright moment while on this range. That had been when he had met lovely Sandra Smith. Their meeting, though, had been anything but conventional; he smiled as he remembered taking her down and sitting on her.

"Sandra Smith hates Powers," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I'm ridin' over to talk to her."

"I trail along, of course."

"You always do."

On the way to the Smith farm they saw a rider along the base of the hills, about two miles away. Tortilla Joe fixed his field glasses on the rider and

said it was a woman. A big woman he said; looked like a squaw. Riding bareback. The rider went into the hills and out of sight.

"Wasn't Sandra?" Buck joked.

Tortilla Joe took it seriously. "Not Sandra. She sleem an' beautiful, she ees; thees beeg woman."

Buck said, "That must be Smith's spread. We're about a mile from Maloney's shack. Sandra said she lived a mile away."

"You know a lots about her," Tortilla Joe joked.

Buck gave his partner a sudden stabbing glance. He liked women a lot, but he didn't want one—not at this stage of the game. There were still hills to ride over and new range to see.

"I know as much as I'm goin' to know."

Chapter NINE

SANDRA SMITH was feeding her chickens when they rode into the yard. The clean beauty of the girl registered on Buck McKee, even though he deliberately steeled himself against her appeal.

"Mr. McKee— What happened to your face?"

Buck tried to grin. "John Powers done whipped me," he joked.

"Oh!"

The grain bucket fell to the ground. Golden wheat spilled out into the dust. The chickens fell to with great ambition.

"He whipped you, you say?"

Pete Smith had come out of the house. He stood and studied them with a slow appraisal. "Always figgered mebbe Powers was a tough gent with his fists," the farmer said slowly. "From the looks of your face, fella, I guessed right for onct."

Tortilla Joe said, "He didn't tell you all, folks. He laid John Powers out cold an' he wrecked hees shack. Eef you theenk Buck looks bad you should see John Powers."

"Hope you kilt him," Pete Smith grumbled.

Sandra spoke to her father. "This is Mr. McKee,

Dad. And this is Mr. Tortilla Joe, who killed—er, shot down Sig Rudder."

Pete Smith shook hands with Buck. Buck and his partner dismounted and were invited into the house. The house, such as it was, was pleasant—Sandra was a good housekeeper. Buck told about the deal John Powers had pulled on him and his partner. Pete Smith listened and nodded. Powers, he said for the tenth time, was a skunk—a human skunk. Sandra boiled a fresh pot of coffee and stood beside the stove and listened to the men talk.

"I don't understand John Powers," the girl said.

Her father said, "He's got some scheme up his sleeve and it ain't for the good of us farmers, you can bet your last dollar on that."

Tortilla Joe asked, "What ees hees scheme, gentlemans?"

"I sure don't know," Pete Smith replied. "He got us farmers in here and now he's bought up the homestead rights of them that has pulled stakes an' left Ringbone. What does he aim to do with the land, I wonder?"

"He wants the land for some reason," Buck said. "He's got a scheme to get hold of it and he's usin' you farmers."

Sandra asked, "Wonder if he's joined forces with Matt Williams?"

That was a new angle. They considered that

premise for a short time. Buck told about meeting Ag Keller and the warning Keller had given them. Suddenly Sandra gasped and Buck glanced up in surprise, expecting to see that she had allowed the coffee to boil over. But she was looking at Tortilla Joe.

"Oh, Mr. Tortilla, I almost forgot. There was somebody here looking for you not more than an hour ago."

"Look for me? Who was he?"

"It was a she, not a he. She was Big Bob Williams' squaw, Many Feathers."

Tortilla Joe allowed a deep frown to mar his brown forehead. "I see big womans ride away on horse when we rides in here. She goes eento the heels. You say the squaw she want to see me?"

"That's right."

Tortilla Joe looked at Buck McKee. "That no make the good sense, Buck. I no even know thees squaw. Yet she look for me, eh?"

Buck smiled. "You got too many women, pard. You've only been here a few days and already you got two women—Margarita and this Crow squaw."

"Thees ees no joke, Buck."

Sandra told about giving the squaw a horse and how her face had been swollen. "Matt Williams kicked her, I guess. He ran her off the Cross in a Circle the minute his father died."

Tortilla Joe let his heavy shoulders drop. "The theeng ees beyond thees young man's mind," he said.

Pete Smith suddenly asked, "You boys runnin' out of Ringbone Valley?"

There was a silence. Pete Smith watched them, leaning forward a little in his chair, his bony hands cradling a cup of coffee. Sandra, seated now at the table, watched them also, her lovely brown eyes on Buck.

Tortilla Joe wet his lips, but said nothing.

Finally Buck McKee said, "Look at it from our angle, Mr. Smith. We were tricked in here by John Powers. He wanted us to gun with him, but we don't sell our guns. My partner here has killed a man—a Cross in a Circle man. He didn't want to kill that man."

"That ees right, mens."

Buck said, "We have nothing at stake here to fight over. You own a farm, the other farmers have property—they have a reason for fighting. But we're drifters, and we own nothing but our horses and saddles and our shirts and pants."

Sandra flared, "And you want to own nothing, I take it!"

The ferocity of her tone caused the partners to stare at her. It was some moments before Buck McKee could find his tongue.

"That's right, Miss Sandra. The more you own

the worse you feel. When you don't own nothin', you ain't got no worries."

"Hogwash!" Sandra said unexpectedly.

Pete Smith smiled. "Women always want a man to take on some burdens, men. They ain't happy unless they got a man working."

"Dad, that isn't true. But what fun is life unless one has responsibilities? The only true happiness one gets is in making somebody else happy."

Buck said, "I suppose I should get shot and killed just to make some farmer I don't know happy?"

She stood up and put her hands on the table. "Buck McKee, that isn't what I meant, and you know it! Buck, use your brains! Matt Williams isn't going to let you two ride out of Ringbone alive! You've gone against him and Matt is a proud man. If you two get the best of him he'd be the laughing stock of Ringbone Valley, and he's got to make an example of you two! Otherwise, his power is broken, and two drifting cowpunchers broke it!"

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe.

Tortilla Joe's brown doggish eyes were worried.

Pete Smith chewed on a toothpick, his jaws working. His faded eyes were without color or thought.

"We can get out," Tortilla Joe said.

"How?" challenged Sandra.

Buck said, "There's always a dark night. This basin is a big valley and there's miles of hills surrounding it. A man can ride through any of a hundred coulees and get out of Ringbone."

"You'd—run?"

Buck smiled thinly. "It might be runnin' to you, Miss Sandra. You don't have to draw and shoot a gun, and you won't be the one who has to pull that gun a shade ahead of the other fellow—or be dead. It ain't runnin' to me. It's just common sense."

Now Pete Smith spoke. "You two won't get out alive. You can try it some night or in the daylight, but you won't make it. Williams has got gunmen on his payroll. They're killers, jest like Ag Keller's a killer. They know all the trails and you two won't ride them."

"That," said Buck, "remains to be seen."

Tortilla Joe got to his feet, a heavy deceptive man of the saddle. "We go now, Buck," he said. . . .

So they left the Smith homestead. Sandra smiled at Buck as she said goodbye, but her smile, he knew, was only a mask to hide her real feelings. He got a glimpse into her character and, while he liked her, she had a stubborn streak, he realized—it could cause the man who married her a lot of trouble. And it could cause her much trouble, too.

Pete Smith merely said, "Good luck, buckaroos."

But Buck detected a sort of sadness in the lanky farmer's words. He got the feeling that these farmers were looking desperately for a leader. And for awhile Pete Smith had figured that he, Buck McKee, had been that leader.

Now Buck was riding out of Ringbone and he was shattering this hope. Once Buck glanced back. Pete had gone into the house but Sandra still watched. Buck lifted his hand a little. She did not wave back. Then the cottonwood trees hid her.

Tortilla Joe said, "She ees a leetle beet mad, Buck."

"All women are mad most of the time," Buck philosophized.

Tortilla Joe nodded. "I wonder what the squaw she want of Tortilla Joe? Maybe I got two womans here, no?"

Buck said, sourly. "We'll gun our way through. We're done here. I'll be glad to leave."

"Sandra, she like you."

Buck said nothing. He remembered her brown eyes and he saw the fullness of her, the rise of her breasts, the way she filled her shirt and her levis. But above these personal qualities there was the measure of scorn in her eyes. She was proud and she was good and she was strong—yet she was as

soft as the prairie wind caressing the sagebrush.

Buck said, "Once in grammar school I read about a woman thet caused a war. She had a face that launched a thousand ships, or somethin' like that. Wonder what her name was."

"A thousand sheeps! Some womans. Her name no was Sandra."

"I know that."

"She was the Helen of Troy, Buck."

Buck looked at his Mexican partner with surprise in his eyes. "My gosh," he breathed, "I didn't think you knew that, Tortilla Joe."

"I know lots of theengs, compadre."

Chapter TEN

THEY BURIED Big Bob Williams that afternoon in Ringbone town.

The cowman's body was lowered into the grave in a simple wooden casket made by the local carpenter. The casket was not very well made. The carpenter had been pretty drunk when he pounded it together.

Matt Williams stood beside the grave with a stern, emotionless face. He shed not a tear and he had no tightness in his throat.

An era had ended.

The era of King Cow—when cow was king—was gone. The longhorn had replaced the buffalo and the cowpuncher had replaced the redskins. King Cow had had his day. He had come into power after the Civil War. Now he was going out of power. He was following the buffalo off open range. Within twenty years open range would be completely gone. Gone before the plows and the fences of the farmers. That was only proper; a part of history. The buffalo had had his heyday. King Cow and the cowmen had had theirs, too.

Now it was time for the big cowman—the man who ran thousands of head of cattle over free grass —to leave the scene.

There were not many people at the funeral. Although Big Bob had been known the length and breadth of the Territory not many people came to see him given to the earth. For one thing they buried the cowman the next day after his death and his friends had not had time to come from any distance. Some of them, in fact, had not even heard that Big Bob had died.

Matt Williams wanted his father's body out of the way. Matt Williams had a chore to accomplish here in Ringbone Valley.

The casket sank into the ground and the gravedigger started to throw sod on it. Matt got his bronc and rode the half-mile from the cemetery into Ringbone town. He had a small crew with him. His men rode behind him, saying very little.

None of the farmers attended the funeral.

Most of the Cross in a Circle men were out in the hills that surrounded Ringbone town. Matt Williams was making sure that two men—two drifters who had defied his rule—would not be able to sneak out of Ringbone.

He and his riders came to town. His men dismounted in front of the closest saloon. Matt rode down to the office of Lawyer Hankins. There he put Big Bob's will on probate. The lawyer read the

will and said, "He leaves five thousand to the squaw. Where is she?"

Matt Williams smiled. "She left the country."

The lawyer studied him through thick glasses. "It might hold up the procedure a little. The county court will make a search for her to settle the will. If she is dead it will simplify things a lot and speed up your getting possession in full of the Cross in a Circle, Matt."

"She might be dead by now," Matt said.

Matt Williams leaned back in his chair. He should have killed the squaw. Why hadn't he killed her? He thought, I must be getting soft in the head. I should have killed her.

"You run the outfit as you see fit," the lawyer told him. "From all angles it is your cow-outfit, Matt."

Matt Williams stood up, said, "I figured that, lawyer."

The lawyer said nothing. He was digging in his files, looking for a folder in which to file the will.

Matt Williams left.

Outside, he breathed deeply of the clean good air, and this made him remember Big Bob, down there in the ground with a ton of dirt on him. Big Bob did not breathe. For a moment, then, something akin to pity flashed through Big Bob's son; this feeling, though, was short of life. Big Bob had softened a lot toward the last when the Grim

Reaper had come closer. He had not wanted to fight the farmers. Well, the farmers would have a fight now, and a stiff go, too.

He saw John Powers come out of the doctor's office. Powers looked at him and he looked at the farmer.

"You fall under a disc?" Matt Williams asked scornfully.

He had expected antagonism to color Powers' eyes. Instead, no anger came; he saw something there that surprised him a little. It was a scheming, brooding look of speculation.

"I ran into a set of fists," Powers said.

"Who owned them?"

"A guy named Buck McKee."

Williams nodded. "I've heard of him. I thought he had come into this basin to side your damned nesters."

Powers did not answer that. "I want to talk to you some time, Williams. I got something that might interest you."

Matt Williams gave him a slow raking glance. Back of that glance was a puzzled mind. Now why would this sodbuster want to bargain with him and what would they talk about?

"Only thing about you that could interest me, Powers, is that you drag outa this country, and take your damn' farmers with you."

Powers turned suddenly, and walked away. Matt

Williams heard the jingle of tugs, the rattle of wheels, and he looked down the street. The Bighorn Stage had just rounded the corner by the General Store. The six horse team was tired, dust and sweat marked the gray geldings; the tugs were slack. The driver waved at him, then pulled his rig to a halt in front of the hotel.

"All out, passengers. The end of the line."

This was the big event of the day. Even the burial of Big Bob Williams, as significant as it had been, had to take a back seat to the arrival of the stage, a semiweekly affair. Two passengers came from the depths of the dirty stage. One was a girl of about twenty, painted and brazen, who lifted her skirt a little too high when she descended, the driver's hand under her elbow. She stood on the sidewalk, giving the town a hard scrutiny. Then the proprietor of the local saloon stepped forward and introduced himself. He and the girl then went toward his emporium.

"Got a new girl in town," a man said. "Not a bad looker, either."

The second passenger was a man of about fifty. He was short and pot-bellied, and he wore a blue suit, crumpled now from the long trip. He dusted himself, looked around, and then poked a new cigar between his red fat lips. He lit the cigar and blew smoke.

He looked at Matt Williams.

His gaze, though, was impersonal, and it went past the owner of the Cross in a Circle, and traveled around the town of Ringbone. With cold scrutiny the small eyes, half-hidden under fat brows, took in the cowtown.

Matt Williams wondered if the man were a salesman. But the stage driver, digging in the boot, came out with only one suitcase—a small bag. That put the newcomer out of the drummer class. Salesmen always carried suitcases filled with samples.

"Here's your suitcase, fella," the driver said.

The man said, authoritatively, "Take it over to the hotel. I'll pay you there."

The stage driver put the suitcase on the ground. He rubbed his hands together and looked around at the crowd in wonder. Then he said, "To hell with you, bucko. I'm not your slave." He climbed onto the seat and trotted away with noisy tugs, dust rising from his stage's wheels.

The newcomer smiled, but the smile was not an easy one. He flicked ashes from his cigar, and started toward the hotel door, carrying his suitcase. Just outside the door he met John Powers who said, "Fine day, sir."

"Fine day, sir," the man returned.

Powers asked, "New-comer here?"

"New-comer."

Powers said, "Hope you have a nice stay, stranger."

"I will have." The stranger mouthed his cigar and said, in a very low voice, "I'll see you later, Powers."

"Nice town," Powers said loudly, and went out onto the sidewalk.

The conversation had taken but a brief period. To the casual observer it would seem that John Powers was welcoming a stranger to Ringbone. The stranger went into the hotel and registered as Jacob Mudd.

Powers went to the Broken Boot Café. There Mildred James waited on him. Powers tried to get her into a conversation. He was doing all right until Matt Williams came in. For some reason, Mildred James suddenly lost desire for conversation with him. Powers scowled and wondered if he had said something wrong.

She did not talk with Matt Williams, either.

Williams ordered in a low voice. Powers finished his coffee and went outside. Cross in a Circle riders, for some reason, seemed to be converging on the Broken Boot Café.

They took seats. They ordered coffee. They spiked the coffee with whiskey. They had all been drinking. Not drunk, not boisterous, but a little under the influence—a cold hard-grained influence

that made them clip their words, that made them surly.

Mildred James frowned as they poured whiskey into coffee. Matt Williams saw that frown and he deliberately spiked his coffee.

"Matt?"

"Yes?"

"I'm selling out the café, Matt."

"Then you're leavin'?"

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Make up your own mind, gal."

The moment had passed. He had said the wrong thing. He was instantly aware of this, and it increased his coldness.

"I'm leaving," she said.

He said, "Well, then you're leaving."

They looked at each other. He judged she was close to tears. He had drunk just enough to make him want to hurt somebody. He wanted to hurt her. He had hurt her. He wished she would have cried.

"Drink up, men," he said tersely.

Chapter ELEVEN

THAT NIGHT Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe tried to ride out of Ringbone Valley. They ran into a stone wall of resistance—a wall of ugly guns. They could have ridden out of the basin but, because of the resistance, they both grew angry and decided to fight Matt Williams.

It happened in this manner: Matt Williams had on his payroll a half-breed Sioux named Big Moccasins. He had big feet but he had silent feet. He also had the nose of a wolfhound and the ears of a cougar. Williams had given him specific orders to kill Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe, and to keep them from skipping out of Ringbone Valley. Big Moccasins wanted a hundred dollars. He had with him three Cross in a Circle men, and he cut ahead of Buck and Tortilla with these men and they waylaid the two cowpunchers in the rough country. He didn't kill Buck and Tortilla Joe. But he and his gunmen turned them back into the basin.

Buck did not know it until the next day, but either one of his bullets—or a bullet from Tortilla Joe's rifle—killed the half-breed called Big Moccasins. He would never have known it had not the

other Cross in a Circle men taken the half-breed's body into town for burial. Had they buried Big Moccasins in the badlands Buck would probably have never thought their night-flung bullets had taken a human life.

Big Moccasin had been high on a ridge. He had shot down, but he had not adjusted his sights; his lead had plowed into the earth ahead of Buck's bronc. Buck had left saddle fast, with Tortilla Joe on his spurs. They had fought it out from the safety of some boulders, and they had driven off the Cross in a Circle men. The fight had lasted about an hour before the Williams' men had been driven into a hoof-rattling retreat.

"There they ees go, Buck. We can ride out of the basin now, senor."

Buck sat on the ground, long legs running out in front of him as he put new cartridges into his rifle's magazine. A trickle of blood had dried on his swollen left cheek. A bullet had knocked a sliver out of a rock about a foot from his head. He slammed a new cartridge into his Winchester's barrel.

"Yeah," he said, "we whupped them."

"Now we can ride out."

Buck said nothing for some time. He seemed interested in his rifle. The moon was rising and slanting rays of golden light were beginning to il-

luminate this rough range of boulders and rocks. Tortilla Joe watched him and crunched a tortilla. The tortilla had a hard crust. His teeth made wicked little sounds.

"What you say, Buck?"

"What do you say, pard?"

Tortilla Joe sighed and his forefinger went down and made doodles in the dust. "Me, my papa he teach me not to runs from no mans, Buck. We are free to do the ride on out of here. But steel we leave behin' John Powers. Yes, an' Matt Weeliams, too. Both trick us. Both want to keel us."

Buck nodded. "Keep on talkin', amigo."

Again the Mexican's thick chest rose in a deep sigh. "There ees Sandra—hola, amigo, what a beauty she ees, that *muchachita*!"

"Not for me." Hurriedly.

"No for Tortilla Joe, either. Jes' the same, she ees a woman, an' when we rides out—hola, she ees alone." The Mexican sucked his forefinger. He had a cactus spine in it. "And then, *tambion*, there ees Margarita."

"Oh, yes," Buck said. "Don't forget Margarita, by all means!"

"Margarita she ees make the good tortilla."

Buck said, "Let's stop kiddin' ourselves, Tortilla. We can get outa here but I don't cotton to goin' in this manner, for some reason. Maybe I got

a little pride or somethin' but I hate like hell to be run out of Ringbone by anybody, even by the great nibs Matt Williams."

"Me, I ees say the same theeng, Buck."

"We ride back to Ringbone town."

Accordingly they had mounted and had ridden into the cowtown. They had taken their time, letting their ponies amble along. The rest had put new strength back into their broncs but the animals were still tired. They came into the town at daybreak. Margarita was stirring in her cabin. She invited them in and they sat down and she made coffee. She was so big she looked like a small elephant waddling around. Buck thought, if she marries Tortilla Joe and he pays two bucks for a license, he sure is getting cheap beef. He did some mental arithmetic. She weighed, he figured around two hundrjd and fifty pounds. Two dollars divided by two hundred and fifty would be a little less than one cent per pound. Live steers sold for three cents at the loading pens. He must have smiled because suddenly Tortilla Joe asked, "What you smile about, Buck?"

"Nothin'."

Tortilla Joe's brown eyes searched his. Evidently he had seen Buck eyeing Margarita's broad bovine back. He smelled something fishy but he said nothing more. He returned to his hotcakes.

Margarita kept up a running conversation. She wanted to talk about Matt Williams. He was all-wolf now, or so people said, she chattered. He claimed he would run Ringbone Valley and when he got done no farmers would be located on homesteads. He also said he'd get even with those two drifters—that Mexican and that gent named McKee.

"He say that, honey?" Tortilla Joe asked.

"So they tell me. But eet ees time I opens the restaurant. You mens come for the dinner, no?"

"We'll pay for our breakfasts," Buck said.

"No pay."

They tried to force money on the woman but she would not take it. She put her hands behind her back and shook her dark head emphatically. "Both of you are my friends, senores."

"She no take the dinero," Tortilla Joe said, and shrugged.

A few minutes later, fed and almost normal again, the partners rode out of Ringbone, heading for the Smith farm. It was a wonderful morning. Meadowlarks sang in the high grass along the creek and calves ran and played, tails high as they galloped. A young jackrabbit crouched in some sagebrush and watched them ride past, his long ears flat on his back.

Buck breathed deeply and said, "How can man

be so ornery an' mean, Tortilla Joe, when the Good Lord is so good to him? Look at this large fine morning."

"Look who ees come on the horseback," Tortilla Joe said.

Buck saw a rider coming toward them. And, when he recognized the man, all the peacefulness of the morning departed.

"Ag Keller, eh?"

"*Si*, the same."

"He's up early."

"I ride toward the heels, Buck."

Buck nodded. Tortilla Joe rode toward the foothills and, when he had gone about three hundred feet, he reined his bronc around and stopped, facing Buck McKee who sat his horse on the trail.

Ag Keller saw this maneuver, but it was too late to back out, so he pulled his bronc to a halt on the other side of Buck, thus getting the cowpuncher between him and Tortilla Joe. But Buck killed this move by putting his bronc ahead a little, then turning him. By this time Tortilla Joe had his Winchester lying across the fork of his old saddle. Sunlight glistened on the long barrel of the .30-30 rifle.

Buck said, "Goin' some place, Keller?"

"That Mex has the drop on me," Keller growled, and his eyes were pig-eyes—narrow and speculative.

Buck said, "He'll keep a sight on you, too." He seemed lazy and in this laziness was an alert deception. "Maybe you're headin' into the hills to check up on your guards out there, eh?"

"I don't foller you, McKee."

"I think you do." Buck still used that same low voice. "We ran into some of them last night. We could have rode through after the ruckus. We sat there an' chewed the fat among ourselves and decided to go farmin' instead."

"Farmin'?"

"Sure," Buck said, eyes on the gunman. "Lotsa purty girls are farmin'. We like purty girls, savvy."

"You talk like a fool, fella!"

Buck said, over his shoulder, "Keep that Winchester on this son, Tortilla Joe," and the Mexican said, "That I shall gladly do, Buck." Then Buck spoke to Ag Keller again and he said, "Williams tried to kill us up there."

"Williams? Matt spent the night at the ranch, fellow."

Buck said, "There was a fire down in the basin. We saw it from the rimrock. Matt had his men in the Broken Boot. They rode out in a body. Later on a nester's shack burned. Let me tell you a little secret, Ag Keller."

Keller's dull blue eyes were watching Buck closely. He did not know just what to think about this tall cowpuncher.

"Jes' like ol' school days, eh? A little secret?"

Buck nodded. "When you men burned down Maloney's shack the other night you rode plumb into a rider who shot down one of your men, a gent named Tony. Well, Keller, here's the secret—that rider was me."

"I kinda figgered that, McKee. Tony was a good friend of mine. I don't aim to sit here—"

"You won't *sit* that saddle long!" Buck gritted.

Keller tried to dodge the blow. Buck's right hook came in, caught the gunman on the side of the face, and knocked him out of saddle. He landed on his side, and he reached for his gun, but the .45 had slipped out of holster. Buck was on the ground; his boot went out; the .45 slid out of Ag Keller's reach.

Keller sat and spat blood. He looked at the .45. Then he got to his feet and turned his attention to Buck McKee. Anger was a surging force that put hot blood into his jowls.

"Fella, you'll die for this!"

"Put up your fists, Cross in a Circle man!"

Keller got gingerly to his feet. But he made no move to put up his fists. He spoke hoarsely. "I'm no man to use his fists. Fists settle nothin', fella. I work with a gun or not at all. Your friend has the drop on me. I have no short-gun. I won't fight with fists."

Buck slapped him.

The slap was loud. Buck's fingers left white

marks across the red jowls. Slowly blood seeped back.

Still, Keller shook his head. "I won't fight with my fists, McKee. Lemme get my gun and we'll shoot it out."

"All right," Buck said tersely. He got the .45, sun twinkled on it, but Keller did not catch it. It went past him and landed handle-down in the sod.

Keller said, "I've changed my mind. There's two of you an' only one of me. This might be a trap. I get the gun an' the Mex shoots me from behind. There'll be another time."

Buck said, "No fists? No gun?"

"That's right."

Tortilla Joe had ridden over and he shrugged and looked at Buck. "What can a man he do een a case like this?"

"One thing," Buck gritted. "This!"

He grabbed Keller's shoulders. He turned the man savagely. His right boot came up and smacked Keller in the seat of his pants. Keller stumbled ahead, fell down, rolled over, and swore. Anger and shame made his face livid.

"You still don't wanta fight?" Buck demanded.

Keller said nothing. He got to his feet and went to his horse and climbed into saddle. Tortilla Joe had already taken the gunman's Winchester out of its saddle boot.

Keller gave them each a black look, dug in his

spurs, and loped toward Ringbone town, bronc levelling out in his speed. Tortilla Joe looked at Buck McKee. The Mexican rubbed his whiskery jaw and his eyes were thoughtful.

"He no coward, Buck."

Buck said, "No coward. Jest wants his choice of weapons, a man might say. I'll have to kill him the next time we meet, I reckon."

"He gun for you."

Buck said, "Pick up his cutter. Well, we're a rifle and a short-gun ahead, anyway. Hey, more company."

"What the heck?"

This time the rider came out of the low foothills. The rider rode an old nag and the horse ambled along. This rider was big and wide and rode bareback. Buck could hardly believe his eyes, for the rider was plainly a woman. When she got closer he saw it was a squaw. He remembered Sandra saying that Big Bob Williams' squaw had been looking for Tortilla Joe.

"More trouble," Buck murmured.

"All the times the more troubles."

The squaw said, "You Tortilla Joe an' you Buck McKee. I look for you. I Many Feathers, Big Bob's squaw. Matt, he kick me out."

Buck said, "Where do we come in?"

"You fight Matt. Me, I fight Matt, too. We join together. The three of us. We kill Matt."

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe, who shrugged.

"Maybe we don't fight him," Buck ventured.

"You two no run. You fight Cross in Circle men last night. You win an' you stay here. You fight." She shook her head. She was positive. She had her mind made up. Only death could change it. "I stay with you."

Buck tried to change her mind. Tortilla Joe pleaded with her. Many Feathers merely shook her head until her dark braids rattled. "I stay with you mens. You two my mens now."

Buck gave up.

Tortilla Joe shrugged helplessly.

Buck said, "Give her the rifle and the short-gun. Whether we like it or not we got a partner, Tortilla Joe."

He had expected relief to flood the stolid wide face. Still, Many Feathers' face showed nothing. She looked at Buck's swollen face.

"We both got hurts. You win your fight; I lose mine. Maybe I win the last one, though."

"You never win the last one," Buck philosophized. "Death always wins, woman."

Chapter TWELVE

WHEN THEY RODE into the yard Sandra Smith was again feeding her chickens. She nodded at Many Feathers. "See you found them." She looked at Buck. "I knew you'd be back."

"How did you know?"

"You're the type who won't run from danger."

Buck dismounted. "Thanks." He smiled at her. "Thanks for knowing."

Sandra blushed and then Pete Smith came out of the barn, slammed his manure fork into the earth, and said heartily, "By Gawd, McKee and his pardner. Couldn't make it out of the basin, eh?"

Sandra spoke sternly. "Father, they wouldn't run from Matt Williams, and you know that!"

Buck quickly noticed the authoritative note in the girl's voice. She was one who would grab the bull by the horns and throw him. Her future husband would have to have a stern ruling-hand and a stern tongue.

Buck said, "Williams and his men left town in a group last night. Later on we saw flames from over the ridge."

Pete Smith's hang-dog face assumed a pathetic look. "They burned down young Paul Hammond's spread. They didn't kill him, though—anyway, we couldn't find the body in the ashes. Paul was a single man. They're takin' the single ones first, 'pears to me—warnin' us with dependents to scoot outa the basin."

"Couldn't find a body, eh?" Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. "We never heard nothin' in town about Hammond gettin' in there. Margarita would have told us."

"She'd 've known about it, too," Tortilla Joe put in. "She knows all the gossip jes' like that!" He snapped his fingers.

Buck scowled. "Mebbe his body was completely burned?"

"No trace of his carcass," Pete Smith said.

Sandra wiped her eyes. Many Feathers sat on her old nag and had a dark and colorless face.

"I liked Paul," Sandra said. "He had a girl back in Ohio who he was going to marry. I'll have to write to her."

Pete Smith spat. Tortilla Joe crossed himself. Buck wondered just where all this trouble was going to end. Then he realized he already knew that answer. He turned his bronc.

"Where are you going, Buck?" Sandra wanted to know.

"We're not married," Buck reminded her.

Her eyes flashed anger. "No, and we won't ever be, I can assure you of that!"

Buck smiled slowly.

Tortilla Joe said, "We take up the homesteads, peoples."

Pete Smith rubbed his bony hands together and showed a wide smile. Sandra was a little surprised but she was so angry she managed to hide this. Many Feathers merely nodded as if this were information she had known for a long time.

"Homesteads! That's good news." Pete Smith was beaming. "Now us nesters really have a couple of leaders. We need gunslingers—"

Buck said, "Let's get this clear, Smith. We're not fightin' for you farmers, savvy. We're fightin' our own battles. We got a score to settle with Matt Williams. It's our score, not yours."

"Then you two ain't gonna lead us?"

"We are not."

Pete Smith's homely face showed abject despair. But Sandra said, "Can you blame them, Dad? They don't even know the rest of the farmers. The only ones they have met is us."

"That's right," Buck said. "We know one other, though, Miss Sandra—and I refer to our good friend, John Powers." The sarcasm was evident.

Tortilla Joe said, "We ride."

They turned their broncs. Many Feathers also

turned her nag. Tortilla Joe said, "You stay here, squaw."

"I take homestead too maybe no?"

Buck said, "A redskin can't file on land."

Many Feathers' deep eyes twinkled. "I fight that out with man in town," she said. She rode with them. Whether or not they wanted her was irrelevant to Many Feathers. She was staying with them. Their opposition meant nothing to her. Her logic was simple. Matt Williams was their enemy. Sooner or later they would tangle with Williams and his crew. When this happened she wanted to be on hand.

"That Sandra, she fight the devil," Tortilla Joe chuckled.

"She can fight him," Buck answered. "Then she won't fight me. She'll be too busy."

They rode toward Paul Hammond's cabin. They had already made their plan. They would file on homesteads and thereby further incite Matt Williams' hatred toward them. Ag Keller would tell his boss that Buck had downed the gent named Tony. Maybe Keller would even tell about Buck's fist driving him from saddle but Buck doubted that. Keller would keep that to himself because of his pride.

They came to the ashes of Hammond's shack. A farmer was looking at the ruins. He intro-

duced himself and he seemed to know who they were. Buck and Tortilla Joe looked through the ruins carefully. No body had been burned. Buck knew that there would have been some trace of the corpse had Hammond burned with his house.

"You look in the brush, farmer?"

"We looked good, McKee."

Buck said, "Any open land for homesteadin' around here?"

The farmer said, "See John Powers. He'll locate you boys."

"Powers won't locate me," Buck grunted. "We're takin' up homesteads. How about that land next to this homestead down the crick a-ways?"

"Free land."

"How do you take up the homesteads?" Tortilla Joe wanted to know.

The farmer explained. You paid a filing fee with the land-agent, who was the Ringbone postmaster. Then you located your homestead on his map. You drove in temporary corner-stakes and later on the surveyor would come out from the county seat and make a legal survey.

"I got a hatchet tied to my saddle," the farmer said. "You can use it to cut an' drive stakes."

With the help of the farmer they got two homesteads staked out. Both would be one hundred and sixty acres, the legal limit. Buck kept thinking about Paul Hammond. He got the theory that the

Cross in a Circle men had murdered the farmer and then had carried his corpse back into the hills and buried him. It was Many Feathers who smashed this theory to smithereens.

She spoke in a voice so quiet that only Buck could hear what she said.

"Hammond, he no burn."

"How do you know?"

"I see blood. Farmers, they no can trail skunk with tail up. Trail go into hills. I find him."

"Where is the blood?"

"I take you to him."

She had been riding along the foothills. The wind during the night had whipped away footprints or hoofprints. Buck would never have noticed the drop of dried blood in the brush.

"Him go that way."

Buck said, "Trail him, Many Feathers."

They had sent the farmer home, after returning his hatchet. He had waited patiently for his hatchet back. Buck and Tortilla rode behind Many Feathers, who, many times, had to dismount to further decipher the trail. Buck and Tortilla Joe were both above the average trackers, but this Crow squaw had them skinned hollow at the job. She followed a trail where there seemed to be no trail.

They worked for hours. The sun heeled over the zenith had started its downward fall. Still, she ferreted out the trail and, at last, they found the

farmer in the deep buckbrush. He was unconscious. Buck, at first, thought he was dead: he lay so still against the soil. But when he opened the man's shirt he found that his heart still beat. A weak beat, true, but still life was with Paul Hammond.

"He no know nothin'," Many Feathers said.

Buck said, "I don't know how she did it, Tortilla."

"She track the weend. Eees he steel alive, Buck?"

Buck nodded, "We got to get him to the doc. There's a medico in town, ain't there, Many Feathers?"

"One there. Him drunk all the time. Him no good. I doctor heem."

Buck looked down at the wounded youth. Not more than twenty-two, with a thin face and a slender body. A bullet had gone through Hammond's chest high on the right side. He had lost lots of blood and shock had knocked him cold; besides, he had walked about four miles after being shot.

"Where will we take him, Many Feathers?"

"Take him to Smith farm, maybe?"

Tortilla Joe said, "I'll ride ahead. They can meet us at the edge of the hills with a buckboard."

The Mexican turned his horse.

Many Feathers got some grass, wadded it, and blocked the rifle-holes in Hammond's shoulder. Buck poured water from a canteen over the youth's

face. His lips moved, his tongue came out; his eyes opened. Terror filled his eyes, and then this subsided before the push of reality.

"I'm Buck McKee, Hammond. Your friend."

Hammond looked at him almost vacantly. Then his eyes shuttled over to the squaw. "Many Feathers," he murmured. "Big Bob's woman."

"I help you, white mans."

Hammond made a weak smile. He closed his eyes and his lips said, "God, we need Your help against a terrible enemy. God, help us to be strong, and to win; our side, God, is just."

Many Feathers tore Hammond's bloody shirt into strips. Buck helped her by holding the limp body upright while she made her bandages. Her dark stubby fingers, worn by work, moved as quickly as they could. Once their fingers touched. Buck got the impression that she was good and kind and her heart bled for this wounded youth. He had heard that Big Bob had had three wives—white women. One had died and two had left him. He figured this Crow squaw had been the best wife the cowman had ever had.

"Now we can move him, Buck."

Hammond was boosted in front of the squaw, with Buck lifting him onto the old horse. Movement brought some strength to the youth and he dug into the bronc's mane for leverage, with Many Feather's strong arms around him to balance him.

"They came out of the night, I was in the brush—"

Buck murmured, "Hush, fella. Look toward the future, not the past. Get well first, and then think of other things. Now work with this good woman and with me, and we'll take you to the Smith farm."

They came out of the hills—a slow-moving pair of riders—and when they reached the rim of the rough country Tortilla Joe and Sandra and Pete Smith awaited with a buckboard. Tortilla Joe and Buck and Pete got Hammond off the horse and into the buggy. Sandra had put a bunch of grass and a blanket on the floor and they got the youth on this.

Slowly they drove to the Smith ranch. There they got young Hammond into a bed. Sandra and Many Feathers changed his bandages and Many Feathers had the girl kill a chicken so she could make broth. Buck and Tortilla Joe talked with Pete Smith, telling him about their new homesteads.

"You'd best file on them soon, eh?"

"We're headin' into town now," Buck said. "Wish we had some fresh horseflesh under our kaks, though."

"I got a couple of broncs. Not fast ones, but fresh."

Buck said, "Thanks, friend."

Many Feathers came from the house. "Where do you ride, my friends?"

Buck told her.

She said, "I stay here. I nurse sick man."

Buck took her worn, heavy hand. "That is good, mother," he said simply. "This ugly world needs more good people like you."

Her eyes met his, and her eyes glowed.

Chapter THIRTEEN

THE POSTMASTER was about thirty—a heavy-set, stolid man of slow movements. He studied Buck and the Mexican as though they were men from another planet and all the time he chewed tobacco with monotonous regularity.

"Am I hearin' right?" he asked.

Buck said, "You heard right, bucko. We got homesteads staked out and we want to pay filin' fees an' get our applications on record."

"You two is cowpunchers, ain't you?"

"We were," Buck said. "Now, mister, trot out your papers, and we'll pay and sign."

A fly buzzed through the hot still air. He encircled Buck's head and the cowpuncher swatted at him and missed. Still, the postmaster made no move—he just stood across the desk, studying them.

Tortilla Joe glanced at Buck. "Maybe he ees the Weeliams man, no, an' he no want us een thees countries?"

Unknowingly the Mexican had spoken the truth. Big Bob Williams had got the postmaster job for this fellow. Big Bob had had quite a bit of

political pull. So he had got this soft job for this big fellow.

"You men don't want homesteads," the postmaster said. "You're cowpunchers, not sodbusters. This is just a passing whim with you. I can't cater to whims and therefore I can't sign you to homesteads."

"You work for the gover'ment, don't you?" Buck asked.

"I do."

"Then you work for me," the cowpuncher said. "Trot out those papers and get this thing lined up in a legal manner, and make it pronto."

They looked at each other.

Buck was tired and disgusted. Since his arrival on Ringbone grass he had been tricked, had had to fight with his fists, and had killed a man he had not even known—killed him because the man had shot at him in the night. He had not had a pleasant time. Everywhere he turned he met opposition. Even this political hireling of the Cross in a Circle spread was bucking him. . . .

The postmaster was a big man. He had spent a year in the army before he had acquired a "sore" back. He had done some fighting and drinking while there and he imagined himself to be pretty tough. He had whipped three local citizens in the last year, but he had picked his opponents rather carefully. He figured he had acquired a rep as a

tough man with his fists. Buck McKee had a black eye and his face was swollen from John Powers' fists. The postmaster did not figure Powers as much of a fighter. Therefore his logic ran in this manner: If John Powers could scar up McKee, then *he* could surely whip McKee. But he underestimated John Powers, and therefore he underestimated Buck McKee, too. So he turned his back and said, "Get the hell outa my office, both of you!"

Buck didn't hit him.

Buck shoved the table forward with a fast savage motion. The edge of it caught the man across his hips and sent him lurching ahead. He ran into the wall, turned, and ran into a right fist. He sat down and his eyes were glazed. Things had happened too fast!

He stared up at Buck McKee. "You—"

"Get on your boots, fella, an' git to work!"

The man leered at Buck.

Buck pulled him upright. It was a feat of some strength. He tore the postmaster's shirt and it ripped with a purring sound.

The postmaster hit him and Buck stepped to one side and clipped the man with a left.

When the postmaster came to he was in a chair slumped over the table. Tortilla Joe was at the postal window looking for a letter for the town drunk who had wide eyes.

"New postmaster?"

"Ol' one he seeck." Dirty fingers handled letters. "What you say your name she be, senor?"

"Olaf Gunderson."

"Irish name, eh? Me, I can no see name on letter."

Buck took the letters. "He can't even read, Gunderson." He had a difficult time deciphering some of the names. Finally he handed the drunk a letter. "This your name, fella?"

Olaf Gunderson squinted. He was not too steady in his boots. "That's my name." He jammed the letter into his pocket and leered at the postmaster, who was just coming to. "Ceilin' fall down on him?"

"Sure did," Buck said.

Olaf Gunderson giggled. "New postmaster, eh? Gotta tell the town." He walked outside, and he swayed a little. "Got a letter too, I did. Ain't got one for three or four years. . . ."

Buck drew his .45. The postmaster watched with alarmed eyes. Buck walked over to him, pistol dangling. The postmaster, wide awake now, leaned back, and his eyes were distended, the pupils wide.

"What you aim to do, McKee?"

Buck gingerly laid the barrel of the gun across the man's thick neck. He tapped up and down gently. Apparently he seemed to be selecting a spot on which to hit the man.

"Mister, I'm tired of foolin' aroun', savvy?"

"Matt Williams told me not to let no more homesteads go out of this office. Matt'll kill me—"

"If he doesn't, I will. Now where are the forms?"

Tortilla Joe asked, "*Si*, where are they, postmasters?"

"In that second drawer."

"I get them, Bucks," Tortilla said.

Buck jugged his .45, and it sank into holster. Tortilla Joe came with the forms. The postmaster complained of a headache. Buck's eyes widened and he wondered aloud what made the man's head ache. The postmaster wet his lips and wanted a drink. He had four bits in a desk drawer. Would Tortilla Joe take the fifty cents and hurry over to a saloon and get some Old Horseshoe? Tortilla would and Tortilla Joe did, and by this time the entire town was in the postoffice watching them. Olaf Gunderson evidently was the town's walking newspaper along with being the town drunk.

"Look at 'em, men!"

One woman said, "I hope they straighten that stupid ox out for good!"

"He's a Williams' man, and don't talk that way."

"Williams is goin' to lose. He can't win."

Buck listened with half an ear to the conversations. One thing was certain—word of this would get to Matt Williams and get there fast. He noticed

a heavy-set man in the crowd—evidently a business-man of some sort. He seemed lazily interested in this, but back of his small grey eyes lurked curiosity. His eyes met Buck's and for a moment each studied the other. And, for some reason, Buck became aware of a feeling that this man was studying him the way a man studies an opponent. Maybe this gent was also a Williams' man?

Later, Buck discovered that the man's name was Jacob Mudd. . . .

The postmaster worked silently, filling out the claim-sheets, with Buck and Tortilla Joe supplying information. Gradually the crowd broke up and dispersed. They had come to see a fight. By the time they had got to the postoffice the postmaster had been a tamed tomcat. Outside, a rider sped past the postoffice, heading out of town at a hard lope; his hoof sounds died.

Tortilla Joe said, "He rode a Cross een a Circle hoss, Buck."

"A spy, goin' to report to Matt Williams." Buck returned his attention to the fingers of the postmaster. "That's right, fella. Well, those two claims are filed; what's the fee?"

"Twenty bucks."

"For both?"

"No, for one filin' claim. That makes forty for both."

Buck shook his head. "The farmers told me the fee was two dollars per claim. Seems to me you raised the ante a little on us, and why?"

"The farmers told you wrong. The fee for both of you is forty bucks. Pay up or I won't put my signature on this."

Buck shook his head in feigned sadness. He didn't have twenty bucks and Tortilla Joe did not have that much either. But there was no use telling this man that they were broke.

"Put your John Hancock on that," he ordered.

"Not unless you pay me."

Buck put his .45 behind the postmaster's left ear. A kid said, "Look, he aims to shoot him! Watch his brains fly out when the bullet busts his skull!"

The postmaster winced.

Buck said, "That gun barrel too cold for you? I could warm it a little and then put it back under your ear."

"When you pulls the treeger," Tortilla Joe said, "the barrel she get warm, Buck."

Buck cocked the big gun. The sound was loud in the silent room.

The postmaster signed. Buck put his gun away. The postmaster said, "This was under duress, men."

Carefully, Buck put the document in his pocket.

"Duress?" He feigned ignorance. "Heck, I don't even know what that word means."

Tortilla Joe said, "Duress? Shore you know what that means, Buck. That ees the theeng the womens wear, no?"

Chapter FOURTEEN

THE MAN named Jacob Mudd had scouted carefully. He had kept his mouth shut and his ears open and inside of a few hours he had had the lay of the land clearly in his mind.

He talked, nodded, seemed agreeable; yet, back of his small eyes, ran his thoughts. They were evil thoughts, motivated by greed. With this greed was mingled a large degree of cunning. John Powers was working his scheme correctly. He was pitting the farmers against the Williams' riders, and the farmers would lose—and Powers would be the winner because, with the farmers gone, Powers would own their lands, and then Powers and a man named Jacob Mudd would be rich.

There was a fly in the ointment—two flies, in fact. He had determined that fact almost immediately. One fly was named Buck McKee. The other—a fat ugly fly—was named Tortilla Joe.

John Powers, he realized, had made one great mistake, and that mistake had been when he had lured Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe onto Ringbone range—and his nefarious scheme to use their

gun speeds had backfired on him. Now the farmers were flocking around McKee and the Mexican.

When Jacob Mudd had stood in the postoffice and had watched Buck McKee get his homestead entry filed, he had secretly appraised the big cowpuncher and the Mexican. His appraisal had also been accurate. McKee was nobody's fool. Tortilla Joe was no fool because he traveled with McKee, and McKee made the tough decisions.

They were two tough enemies.

Jacob Mudd had rolled his cigar between his red lips and had gone to the livery barn where he had rented a horse. He did not use the horse just then; he would use it when darkness came. He spent the rest of the day moving from saloon to saloon, from the hotel lobby through the stores, and he talked a little and he listened much. A man in the Star Rowel Saloon had taken another drink and had openly vowed he would kill both Buck McKee and his partner. The man's nose was swollen somewhat. Maybe a horse had kicked him? Maybe a fist had smashed into his nose?

Jacob Mudd made some discreet inquiries. The man's name, he found out, was Ag Keller, and Keller rode for the Williams' Cross in a Circle spread.

"You a farmer?" Keller had demanded suddenly.

Jacob Mudd had not answered. He had stood at the bar turning his bottle of beer and making damp rings on the glossy surface. He seemed deeply interested in the accuracy of the rings.

"Mister, are you a farmer?"

Jacob Mudd acted surprised. "You speaking to me, sir?"

"Yeah, to you. Are you going out farming?"

Jacob Mudd's voice was placating. "Do I look that stupid, sir? If I do, perhaps a drink for both of us will help us overlook my stupidity? Barkeeper, another beer for me, and whatever the man desires for himself."

"You sound like a good fella," Keller mumbled, the wind taken out of his sails. "Here's to you, mister."

"To you also, sir."

Ag Keller downed his drink with one gulp. Jacob Mudd made more rings with his bottle.

Keller wiped his mouth with his hand. "I'm goin' to kill them two buttons sure as Gawd made green apples." That was the only simile he knew and he lacked the mental capacity to coin another.

"There they ride out now."

Ag Keller turned, hooked his elbows back over the rim of the bar, and watched Buck and Tortilla Joe ride out of town. They were sort of blurred to him and he blamed it on the dirtiness of the glass window.

"Oughta scrub that window some time, barkeeper."

The barkeeper smiled. He had just washed the window that morning. "Why don't you ankle out there an' tackle them, Ag?"

"Two of them!" Keller shook his head. "They'd gang up on me."

Buck and Tortilla Joe rode beyond the limits of the window and went out of sight. Jacob Mudd spoke to the bartender. "Reckon them two boys have really raised hell in this burg, eh?"

"A little bit," the bartender replied. "I think they can raise more though. They don't look a bit soft to me. That Mex shot down Sig Rudder kinda easy like, and Rudder had a rep as a gunhand."

"Slow hand he had," Ag Keller scoffed. "I could shoot him down any day of the week. I'm outa drinks, bartender." Keller looked significantly at Jacob Mudd, who bought him another drink and left to wander around town again, loafing with ears alert.

When darkness came he went to the livery barn. The hostler was out so he saddled the hired horse and rode toward John Powers' homestead. He jogged along, and the horse was hard riding; Jacob Mudd rode well, settling his bulk deep between the fork and cantle.

Apparently he was in no hurry, for he never got the horse out of a trot. It was a large, fine night.

Coolness had come to push away the heat of the day. Along Ringbone Creek wild roses bloomed and sent out their perfume. A trout jumped, making his splash. The horse's hoofs made a steady forward progress.

He followed the creek, smelling its dank odors. When he came to the yard of John Powers' homestead he called, "Rider coming in, John," and sat the borrowed horse, feeling the animal's ribs move the stirrup-leathers. The house had a lamp lit in it and this spilled its rays across the dusty yard. Nobody stirred in the house and nobody answered and a vague resentment arose in Jacob Mudd, seeping into the pores of his big body.

He controlled this and kept his voice level as he again called, "Visitor, John Powers. Peaceful man."

Behind him he heard a boot strike rock. He looked over his shoulder and saw a man coming out of the buckbrush about a hundred feet away.

"That you, Jacob?"

"Who the hell else you expecting?" Mudd made his voice a grating rasp. "You know my voice, don't you?"

"A man has to play his cards close here. I figured it was you but I weren't sure. A man has got to be sure on this range."

"Would an enemy ride openly into your yard?"

John Powers raised his hand to stroke his jaw and then thought better—his jaw was very sore.

"A man can't tell what dirty trick Matt Williams will use. Light an' rest your stirrups, Jacob."

They went into the house with Powers leading the way, with Jacob Mudd waddling behind, with the hired horse standing in the clearing with his reins down. Once in the house Powers said, "Find a chair somewhere, Jacob."

Mudd looked around, eyes speculative. "McKee and you sure busted up the furniture," he said at length.

"We sure did."

Mudd decided on the bunk. He sat down slowly, as though fearful that his weight would flatten the bed. Once settled, he leaned forward, chubby hands clasped between his thick knees.

"Didn't expect you here for some weeks yet," Powers said.

Mudd cleared his throat. "John, this is going too slowly. We got to get these deeds right pronto. The big company I represent is getting restless. They want these deeds and they want this tin mined and out of here."

"I'm doin' my best."

"You got deeds of about three homesteaders, I understand. We need more deeds. We can't go in on government land and mine because the govern-

ment won't let us. Uncle Sam wants tin, too."

"I hope," said John Powers, "that there *is* tin here."

"It's here. I'm a geologist. I've scouted this land. Don't worry about that angle. Only thing we have to do is to get the ball rolling and we have to get these deeds and strike while this big corporation is interested. They're scouting for tin in Peru and Colombia, too. We got to beat those geologists to it."

"I'm doin' my best."

"I disagree with you."

Anger rolled a ruddy path across John Powers' ugly swollen face. "Don't rub my fur the wrong direction, Mudd. I'll do to you what I did that day in the prison yard down in Yuma."

"Forget that prison deal!"

"We're both ex-jailbirds, and don't forget it. I went over the wall and you stuck your sentence out. Just because I'm wanted in Arizona Territory —well, don't try to hold that over my head, savvy? I'll cut out your black heart if you try that, Mudd!"

"I served my sentence. Three years for oil fraud, and I never made a damned cent out of it, either. But there's a hell of a difference between fraud and murder, especially when a woman is the one murdered."

"She asked for it. She doublecrossed me."

Jacob Mudd waved his cigar impatiently. "We're talking like kids. Our past has nothing to do with the present outside of the fact that we met in Yuma. I still claim you haven't made things move fast enough."

"I'm working the nesters against the Cross in a Circle. I'm pushin' Williams hard. We had a stroke of luck when Big Bob died. Matt is hitting harder than his father did. He's burned two shacks in a couple of nights. Killed Maloney and wounded Hammond, and the fear of the future is with these farmers."

Jacob Mudd shook his head again. "Sure, you pitted the farmers against Williams, but what else have you done?"

"I sat to one side an' egged them on."

"Not enough."

John Powers grabbed a chair. He sat on it backwards, jaw on the back of the chair, and his eyes, boring down on Jacob Mudd, were pin points of anger.

"All right, if you're so damn smart, do so—me talkin'!"

Mudd rolled his cigar. "I understand this Williams has a girl down town. Now if some farmer —say yourself—could get her away from Matt Williams!"

"That's out."

"Why?"

"She sold out and she left town today. She owned the Broken Boot Café. Mildred James is out of the picture."

"Will it affect Matt Williams?"

Powers scowled. "Doubt it. Matt loves nobody but Matt Williams. All right, any more ideas?"

"Don't get tough with me!"

Powers smiled thinly, "Talk some more."

Mudd studied him through tawny eyes. He took his cigar down and studied it thoughtfully. "No use in us fighting," he murmured. "But John, we got to speed things up. You made a hell of an error when you got this McKee gent in here. Him and that Mex are tough enemies."

"Yes, I made an error there. Didn't you ever make one?"

Again Mudd smiled. "Yes, on that oil stock deal, and it put me behind bars in Yuma. . . . You miss one point, though."

"And that?"

"You personally haven't hit at the Cross in a Circle. You've hit at Williams indirectly so far."

"That's right."

"You and I are going to hit directly at him with a blow he can blame on your farmers, and then Williams will hit back fast."

"That's logic."

Mudd lifted his dull eyes from his cigar. "We can

burn down some property. Property belonging to the Cross in a Circle."

Their eyes met. Mudd's scheming, dull, filled with devilish wisdom; the swollen, bright eyes of John Powers. Their gazes held for some time. Then Mudd got to his feet, throwing his cigar out the door.

"Let's ride, John," the man murmured.

Chapter FIFTEEN

SPUR ROWELS gouged into the varnished surface of the big table in the living room of the Cross in a Circle ranch house. They were vicious star-rowel spurs, they cut through the surface, scraping the hardwood underneath. The spurs were hooked onto polished boots, and the silverwork on the spurs held a high sheen. The man wore pants with a knife-crease, and his belt was wide with a silver buckle. You saw a clean black shirt, a bow tie, and then you saw the face of young Matt Williams, a wide, handsome face, flushed with whiskey; a young face, strangely hard-looking for its few years.

You could see that the squaw had gone. The room, usually clean and spotless, was dirty with litter, and now the air was gray with rope-like tobacco smoke. Matt Williams lit another cigar.

He was alone in the room. . . .

A rider came along the creek, and the new owner of the Cross in a Circle listened to the pound of hoofs, and thereby judged the rider's speed—and he rode fast. He drew rein and

clumped into the house. It was one of Matt's riders.

"Jus' come from town, Matt. Them two hellions beat up on the postmaster and made him draw up forms for them."

"Forms? For what, Smoky?"

"Homesteads, of course. They got homesteads out along the crick, somewhere aroun' the Smith homestead."

Matt Williams' eyes were sharp over the lighted tip of his black cigar. "Are you fillin' me full of hot air, Smoky? They're *cowpunchers*, not homesteaders."

"They're homesteaders now, Matt."

"What else do you know?"

"I reckon they know now they kilt Big Moccasin last night, 'cause word got out around town that Big Moccasin was shot dead last night, an' they must've heard that an'—"

"That means nothin'!"

"Well, thet's the deal from town, boss." The cow-puncher got to his feet. "Thet big postmaster shore had a pale lookin' face when McKee had his gun behin' his ear!"

Matt Williams nodded. He was remembering, suddenly, that Mildred James had left him, and, for a moment, he had a pang of regret, but this was short of life.

"Get back to town, Smoky!"

"I need money for chuck at the café, Matt."

Matt smiled. "You got credit there. Now get on your nag and head back. Kill McKee or the Mex and it's a hundred bucks for each's hide. Bump off the postmaster and it's fifty bucks for your purse."

"You mean that?"

"Sure I mean it."

The man stood in the doorway, brows pulled down in speculation. Suddenly he said, "Hey, Many Feathers—She's at the Smith farm. She looked up Buck McKee an' the Mex. She trailed and found Hammond."

"I know that."

The man said, deflated, "Hammond is at the Smith farm, they tell me."

"Get out!"

Idly Matt Williams listened to the man's boots run out, and then he heard the rider turn his bronc. Through the front window he watched Smoky ride to the barn and saddle a fresh horse and head out of town. Again, he was thinking of Mildred James—she was gone, he would never see her again. Anger went through him—anger because she had left him; with this, though, was a harsh feeling of loss. And he lowered his head to the table and, for a moment, he almost wept. But reality and greed came back and pushed into limbo the emotion of love.

He was sitting there in the dark living room, a black shadow against the encroaching shadows of the dusk, when Ag Keller entered. Keller peered around the room, said, "Matt, you in here?"

"No, there's nobody here."

Keller said, "Oh, over there—couldn't see you in the dark, comin' in outa the light that way." He came forward and sat down and locked his hands in front of him and looked at them. "McKee and the Mex took up homesteads today."

"Smoky told me."

Keller looked up. "Oh, yes? I saw him ride past the post office when McKee and his pard were workin' over the fat postmaster. I rode past McKee's homestead, and four farmers were there, families and all, waitin' for him an' the Mex."

"Waiting?"

"Yeah, he's their leader, now."

"McKee don't like them sodbusters. He just took up that homestead so he'd pull us into hitting at him. He's nobody's fool, and he's hopped up now, and he wants trouble because of last night."

"He killed Big Moccasin."

"Good riddance."

"McKee was talkin' to them farmers. I met Joe out in the hills after McKee an' the Mex left town. Joe said McKee and the Mex rode for their new

homesteads and the farmers was there a-waitin' them."

"What about it?" Williams demanded belligerently.

Keller said nothing.

"McKee is only a man. So is the Mex. You sound like they're supernatural or they're ghosts. Hell, one bullet in the right place will kill each of them! You brag of your gun. Move it against them and get them out of the way!"

Keller kept watching his hands. He seemed interested in them. Finally he said, "This squaw —this Many Feathers. . . . I don't like her bein' around. She'll kill and not blink a red eye."

"She's a minor point, too. If you can't talk sense, get t'hell outa here and leave me alone."

Keller stood up. "You're in a rough mood, Matt."

"You tangled with McKee today. He worked you over a little with his fists. From what I hear you didn't make much of a showing!"

Keller studied him. "How did you know?"

"I got spies in the hills. One watched you."

Keller blinked his eyes. Rapidly his mind reviewed the identity of the riders who were spies on the nesters. There was Ralph and Ike and Hank—hell, any of them could have seen Buck slap him.

Keller said, "There'll be another time."

"There'd better be. And it had best be *your* time, fellow, or else I'm sendin' you down the road, talkin' to yourself!"

"I might ride off this job."

Williams scoffed, "No, you won't. You got it too easy and your wages are too high. Go to the bunkhouse and tell the boys to get ready to ride inside of an hour."

"Inside of an hour? Okay!"

Keller stood there for a moment longer, and he kept thinking that this day had been a rough one for him. This thought in him, he turned and went to the bunkhouse.

He felt angry and hot and he wished he could kill Buck McKee. The Big Boss was raw under the collar. Well, Mildred James had left him; that was one reason. McKee and the Mex was another. Another was the farmers.

The kerosene lamp, hanging from its wall bracket, showed a dim light through its smoke-blackened chimney. Men lay on bunks and read magazines and some cleaned gear and boots and three were at the far end of the long room playing cards at a rickety table. Keller walked along the bunks and nobody spoke to him but heads lifted and eyes took turns in studying him. He knew these men had heard about his run-in with Buck McKee. His prestige had taken a severe tumble. McKee would pay for it. Only by killing

Buck McKee could he get his prestige back. And prestige and reputation, to a man of his low intelligence, were essential—vitally essential.

"We ride inside an hour, men."

A man asked, "We hit at McKee?"

"I dunno. Matt didn't say where we hit."

"McKee is laughin' at this spread. You're supposed to be the top tough boy on the Williams' payroll. From what I hear McKee pulled the old rooster's tail feathers danged easy."

Keller turned, walked over, and slapped the man across the mouth. He slapped him so hard blood showed. Keller drew his .45 and the man's hand stopped halfway toward his gun.

"You try to pull this rooster's tail feathers, Jim?"

The man looked at him. He looked at the gun. He said, "You're too much for me, Ag. Put the pea-shooter away." The man got a magazine and rolled on his bunk and gave his attention to his reading material. Keller grinned and holstered his gun and looked around and said, "Anybody else feel spry against Ag Keller on this fine Wyomin' evenin'?"

A thick chested man said, sourly, "Save it for later on, you two. You might need it tonight."

"You want trouble, Chester?"

"Not me, Ag."

Keller sat on his bunk. He took down his .45

and cleaned it and then methodically cleaned his rifle. He checked each weapon for loads. By this time darkness had rushed down from the Big Horns. First, it was very dark—a darkness that clung to the range, filling each crevice and contour. Then the moon lanced yellow flame across the mountains, and this came down and kissed the rangeland and broke the darkness into shadows.

Matt Williams came in, carrying a Winchester. "All right, men, get your broncs," he ordered, and turned toward the barn. They followed him with spurs making noises. They went into the barn's interior and under the light of the lantern hanging from the ridge beam they selected their horses. Broncs turned in stalls and looked at them and the lantern light made their eyes round and curious. Saddles lifted and cinches were tied and rifles slid into saddle boots.

They led their broncs outside and boots found stirrups and men lifted their bodies into the night to find their saddles. Williams rode a black gelding and his men rode dark horses—blacks and sorrels and blue roans and dark bays. They grouped around him and he gave orders in a low voice.

Somebody said, "We leave a guard behind, don't we, Matt?"

"Yeah, a guard stays behind." Williams looked

them over, letting his gaze move from man to man. "Are there any questions?"

There was none.

Williams said, "All right, follow me," and he turned his horse.

They sped out of the yard and they were a compact body of hard-riding men sweeping across the moonlit Wyoming prairie. Matt Williams headed them, letting the black run with a fierce swiftness, and the smell of the night—the odors of sage and greasewood, the sweet secret smell of prairie flowers—was strong and wild. He looked back again, felt a tough pride in his horsemen, and then he looked at the moon, and he thought of Mildred James' golden hair.

Again, the feeling of deep loss came. . . . Even a desperate man, bent on hate and death, could remember love . . . could recall tenderness. . . . Matt cursed quietly.

Chapter SIXTEEN

Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe left the town of Ringbone after receiving copies of their filing papers from the clerk. Buck had bought an axe at the Mercantile and he had this tied to his saddle. Also on his saddle was tied a gunny-sack that bulged with canned goods and other commodities. Tortilla Joe jogged along, a sack of nails tied to one side of his saddle; on the other side, he had a skillet and a pot fastened to his saddle strings.

His bronc, tired as he was, did not like the skillet and pot; they bounced and hit him on the ribs, making him skittish. But the Mexican straightened the horse around with a firm rein and a touch of his spurs.

"That postmaster—hola, Buck, but we feex heem, no?"

The Mexican chuckled, the sound arising from the immense cavity of his chest, then rumbling upward. Buck glanced sourly at his partner, noticed the clean, happy expression on his wide face, and some of the darkness of his thoughts abandoned him. Tortilla Joe would laugh in the face of the devil himself!

"He don't love us," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe sent his partner a quick sidewise glance. "You do not sound so happy," he murmured.

Buck spat and grinned. "Who could be happy? We're in trouble. Williams is out to get us more than ever now. So is Ag Keller. Keller ain't forgettin' that pushin' around I handed him. Before this homestead deal, we were jest cowpokes. Now Williams will be after us for sure, just to make an example out of us."

"He have the hard time. Me, I no like to be made the goat, and that ees what we ees now, *no es verdad?*"

"We put ourselves on the spot."

Tortilla Joe untied a *tortilla* and put his white teeth noisily into it. "Shore, we does that, pard. But theenk of Mees Sandra Smeeth."

"I don't want to think of her. I might get to like her too well, and then I'd think of her so much I'd want her close. Women get that way to a man, you know."

Tortilla essayed surprise. His heavy eyebrows arched and made question marks. "Why don't peoples tell me soch theengs?" he asked the world in general. "Me, I knows nothin' at all about love. . . ."

Buck had to smile at that. He rode an easy saddle—a lazy saddle—but he was deceptively lazy,

loafing between horn and cantle. Sandra Smith was a nice girl, a clean sweet girl, but there were other girls, too, just as sweet, just as clean, just as good. Maybe Tortilla Joe was right? Perhaps he was bucking the Cross in a Circle combine because of Sandra? Was he fooling himself, and fooling nobody else, when he swore vengeance on John Powers, and on Matt Williams? He smiled at that, and Tortilla Joe was quick to notice the smile.

"What she ees the fonny, Buck?"

Buck said, sourly, "Your homely face."

"Dios he geeve me thees face."

"God must've had a grudge against you."

Tortilla swallowed the last of the tortilla. "My throat she ees dry. Now if only I had a dreenk of *cerveza.*"

"Beer," Buck said. "Ever see a time when beer didn't taste good?"

"*Si,* after too mucho of it, it no taste the good."

Buck had no answer. He was thinking of John Powers, and he realized that Powers was a hard enemy. What stake did the man have in this basin? Sure, he had located some of the farmers on their homesteads, deriving from this fact a few dollars. That sum, though, was not very great. He was sure that John Powers had some other reason for attempting to wrestle Ringbone range from the Cross in a Circle. He did not know what

that reason was; he wished that he knew. Had he this information, this knowledge, his course of action would become more stable, he realized.

But he did not know, and he had no way of finding out. Accordingly his mind went away from John Powers and over to the Cross in a Circle. Matt Williams would see that he and Tortilla Joe had plenty of trouble. By signing up for homesteads, they had run against the grain of Matt Williams, and they had, in fact, gone deliberately out to defy him. They had waved a red flag in his face. Well, that much was certain, but one thought bothered him—where would Williams hit next?

This was, to put it mildly, rather complicated. Even the squaw, Many Feathers, was in on it. In her narrowed, deep eyes glowed a fanatical light —the light of a person obsessed with one paramount idea. By all rights she should have had a share of the Cross in the Circle after the passing of Big Bob Williams. Her share, though, had been a boot in the face, and that boot had been on the sturdy foot of nobody else than Big Bob's son, Matt.

As for the rest of the farmers, he and Tortilla had not met them all. That thought, for a moment, amused him; here they were—strangers to some of the people whom they intended to help. But he did not do this because of the farmers and their plight. He and Tortilla Joe had moved

against the Cross in a Circle, against John Powers, to satisfy themselves, not to aid the farmers. Of course, they were all banded together in this, but necessity had put them together, not deliberate choice.

Tortilla Joe's voice broke into his thoughts. "She ees a nice evenings, Buck."

Buck said, "A large fine one."

"That fat mans down een town," Tortilla Joe said, watching Buck. "He put the beeg nose of hees aroun' an' first he sneef thees way, then he sneef thees way. He smell around like he ees a dog."

"Jacob Mudd is his name."

"How you find out?"

"I asked a few questions and did some lookin' around myself. Wonder what he aims to do on this range?"

Tortilla Joe shrugged, heavy shoulders lifting, then falling. "Maybe he ees here jes' for the veesit or somethin'."

Buck said, "I'm keepin' an eye on him."

A sagehen crossed the trail, her chickens following her. They went into the sagebrush and out of sight. Over yonder lay an old buffalo-skull, white and bleached by the snow and wind and rain. Neither Buck nor Tortilla spoke until they rode into the yard of the Smith farm. Once again, Sandra was feeding her chickens.

She showed a nice smile. "I'm always feeding chickens when you boys ride in. I heard you two have taken up homesteads?"

"News gets around fast," Buck admitted.

"A farmer was in town when you beat up on the postmaster. For that I want to thank you—he had it coming. Well, this farmer played Paul Revere, and now all the farmers know about you two having farms, too."

Buck dismounted. He asked, "Where is your father?"

"Over at your homestead."

Buck looked at her and his eyebrows rose questioningly. "I don't quite understan' that statement, Miss Sandra. What is your father doing on a piece of ground that's undeveloped and—well, what reason has he to be over there?"

"All the farmers are there."

Tortilla Joe grunted, "What does she mean?" but Buck nodded, understanding. His voice was a little strained when he spoke. "They're gathered there to welcome me an' Tortilla Joe, eh?"

"They are."

Tortilla Joe said, "Oh, I understands now."

Buck said, "Whether we like it or not, Sandra, the farmers have made me an' Tortilla Joe their leaders, eh?"

"That's it. They have always needed a leader. They thought they had one in John Powers. Most

of them by now have lost faith in Powers. They had automatically selected you two as their leaders."

Buck spoke in a cynical manner. "That shore is nice, Miss Sandra. But what if we don't want to be their leaders? Ain't we got somethin' to say about it? When it comes to a showdown we'll have to run against the Williams' spread. I don't think those sodmen would be worth a whoop in hell when the lead starts makin' those funny wheezy little sounds over a man!"

"You settle that with them," she said.

Her tone had suddenly grown almost frigid. Evidently, then, when a person said something about the other farmers, she took it as an almost personal insult—for she was a farmer, too. This group, Buck realized, was very tightly knitted together, and the knitting needles of fear had banded them. He got the impression that perhaps he had underestimated the courage and the strength of these sodbusters. Sandra had lots of spunk and scrap. If they were anything like she was, then they would be good hands to have siding a man in a tight fight.

"How is Hammond?"

"He seems to be well." She was too icy again.

"On what do you base that statement?" Buck wanted to know.

"I was sitting by his bed, feeling sorry for him.

He tried to get his arm around me and to get me to sit on the bed!"

Buck winked at Tortilla Joe. "I don't blame him, Sandra. Was I in bed where he is, I'd try to get my arm around you, too."

"Oh, you would, would you!"

They went into the cabin. Tortilla Joe waddled along, a bear on his hind legs, and he grunted, "She talks the high an' mighty, but if a man could get her alone— Sometimes those high kind give in the easiest."

"Forget it, Tortilla."

Dusk was thick across the range, giving it a dark hue. It filled the cabin, making vision uncertain; Buck saw the huge outline of Many Feathers, sitting on a chair beside the bed.

Hammond said, "Howdy, men. Again, I want to thank you."

"We do it even for you," Buck said, smiling. "How do you feel, bucko?"

Hammond spoke in a low voice. He sounded as though he were in a weakened condition, but he sounded cheerful. He would get better now. He had lost all his property, and he had almost lost his life. Night-riders had cleaned him out. His voice held a harsh edge of hate that was directed toward nobody else than Matt Williams. Williams' Cross in a Circle men had broken him, had shot him, had tailed him to try to kill him.

"And I didn't get a one of them. I was asleep in my cabin when they rode in. . . ." Hammond's voice got a little too high.

Buck said, "We'll see you later, Hammond," and he and Tortilla Joe went outside, with Many Feathers trailing them, her dress rustling, her moccasins making whispers against the plank floor.

"You two mens, you have the homesteads now?"

"Farmers now," Buck agreed.

Her dark, Crow eyes moved from one to the other. "Matt Williams will fight you now for sure. But he is not as big a enemy as John Powers."

Buck said, "How do you know?"

For a moment she was silent. Buck saw her tongue come out and wet her lips. Her big-knuckled hands gripped the looseness of her baggy dress and twisted the cloth.

"He has bad eyes. He has the eyes of a bad, bad bronc."

Then she turned, moving quickly despite her size, and she entered the cabin again, and she was gone. Buck looked at Tortilla Joe who said, "Sometimes, there ees such a theeng as instinct, or whatever you calls eet."

Buck said, "You said it, pard."

Chapter SEVENTEEN

BUCK AND TORTILLA JOE left the Smith ranch, and rode down Ringbone Creek, following a trail that ran along the south bank of the stream. Water gurgled over mossy rocks, a trout leapt for an errant fly, and frogs croaked in the cattail rushes. Neither man said much. What conversation that occurred was of small importance. It was almost dark when they rode around the bend in the hills and came upon their homesteads.

The farmers were awaiting them.

Some had ridden in on horses, others had come by rigs. They made a good sized gathering. Buck did not know just what to say. Whether they liked it or not, it looked to him as if the farmers had chosen him and Tortilla Joe as their leaders. That thought made him smile a little. Things had happened fast on this Ringbone range. Here he was, the appointed leader of the farmers, and he had not even met some of them as yet!

In a way, it was amusing; from another angle, it was a grim business. It was grim because Death was grim.

Tortilla Joe said, "About ten of them, no?"

Buck sent a quick glance over the buggies, buckboards, wagons and saddle horses, and nodded. "About a dozen, I'd say. Took their women and kids along, even. They see us now, I guess."

A cheer went up from the assembled people. Kids ran out to meet Buck and Tortilla, and Buck had to warn them to stay a careful distance away from their saddle horses. The children called to him and Tortilla Joe, then ran back to their parents as fast as they could.

Their childish shouts went into the hills, and echoes winged back, "They've come—Buck McKee—Tortilla Joe—" These echoes moved back and forth, then died for lack of momentum. By this time, Buck and his partner were with the parents, and these people were not excited. They were calm and grim and an air of tension held them.

Buck dismounted, and Tortilla Joe followed suit. Pete Smith stepped out of the crowd, a thin unshaven man bent by his years—a homely man with a crooked nose, but a sincere and good man.

"Neighbors McKee and Tortilla Joe, we thought we would welcome you to our ranks, so we made this little gathering, and we hope you like it. We have food and we shall eat some, and maybe later on we will dance."

Buck felt the sincerity of the occasion grip him,

and he had difficulty speaking. Tortilla Joe did not even speak. The Mexican only nodded vigorously, his smile wide and happy.

Buck said, "I want to thank you, Mister Smith; I want to thank you all. It is good to have good neighbors but we must remember we are all under stress, and under danger."

"Maybe," a man said, "we should forget danger for a while? It's not good to always bend under one's troubles." He introduced himself and shook hands and the other farmers flocked around, introducing themselves. Women curtsied and smiled and children ran and played and called to each other. Soon baskets of food came from rigs and tableclothes were spread on the grass. Buck knew, now, that he and Tortilla Joe were the leaders of these people, whether he and his partner wanted or did not want the job.

Buck ate with a somewhat feeble appetite, and usually his appetite had no bounds. Inwardly he searched for the reason he had not his usual high taste for good food, for this food was indeed good. Pickles and luscious sandwiches, pots of boiling coffee, relish and canned goods. He decided, after some deliberation, that his appetite suffered because of the predicament he was in, and he wondered if he feared for the safety of these people. That thought, coming suddenly to him,

was almost alarming, and he performed further explorations within his personality.

Tortilla Joe, seated some distance away, ate with other farmers, and Buck heard him laugh occasionally. His meal finished, Buck thanked his hostess—a heavy-set woman who had a daughter of about seventeen—and got to his feet. Instantly the girl was beside him.

"Would you like to walk around, Mr. McKee?"

She was just filling out in maturity, and Buck liked her pretty young face. He nodded and bowed and said, "With your company, Miss Betty, the walk would be more fun."

"Oh, Buck."

Her mother said, "Betty, show Mr. McKee around, while I clean up things. We had all best get home. Our homes are unprotected."

Buck said, gravely, "That would be a good idea, madam."

He walked around the gathering, with Betty chattering beside him. He had one ear for her and another for stray bits of conversation. Only three of the farmers had wives here; others, so Betty said, were married, but their families were in the midwest and east, and would come to Ringbone after their husbands and fathers had become settled.

Buck wondered why Betty had suddenly de-

cided to spend her time on him. That was not reasonable. Betty was at the "boy" stage of adolescence, yes, but he was much older than she. He got the idea, for some reason, that she had seen, in him, an excuse to get away from her mother's possessive apron strings.

Buck watched her and saw her wink at a youth of about twenty—a gangling boy who had introduced himself as Sid Latham, a son of a farmer named Mike Latham. Betty wanted to talk to the youth.

Therefore Buck, to be obliging, talked with Sid's father, a short man with long arms. Mike Latham was in favor of storming the Williams' ranch. Here Matt Williams had burned down two farmers' outfits, had killed Jack Maloney, and had shot down Paul Hammond. And the farmers had done nothing in retaliation.

The farmer pounded his fists together. "I move we hold a meeting and run our guns against them gunhounds!"

Buck caught the stale odor of whiskey on the man's breath. Somebody had taken some liquor to this meeting, and that was not good. From the corner of his eye he saw Betty talking with young Sid. They were very much in love, Buck guessed, and he remembered his first sweetheart, when he had been in grammar school. He decided, then

and there, that a man got old too fast; his days ran away with him. He did not want to talk with Latham any longer. The man was getting drunk and when he got drunk he evidently wanted to fight. Buck called to Betty and they went on, talking now and then with farmers and the women.

Suddenly a fiddle began screeching, an alien sound in the Wyoming hills. Tortilla Joe, always one to dance, grabbed Betty, and they began. Buck danced a few times and then stood to one side, talking with various farmers—he was feeling them out, gauging them, testing their desires and meetle. He decided he had been wrong when he had sized this group up as weaklings.

These men were fighters. They had come to Ringbone to settle down, to raise their families, and they were ready to fight for this opportunity. Buck was, in a way, proud to be a leader of their ranks. Then, as he looked at their wives and children, when he thought of the women and children who were not present, he felt serious misgivings. War meant death and death meant weeping women and heartsick children. And those thoughts were not good.

He squatted beside a wagon, watching the dancers on the grass in the moonlight. Suddenly a big form materialized beside him and he stood up, doffing his hat automatically.

Betty's mother frowned. "We should go home, Mr McKee. All of us should go home. What if the Williams' crowd struck tonight at a farm house?" she asked. "Our properties are deserted."

Buck said, "That is right, ma'am."

"I wish I knew where Betty went to."

"She's gone?"

"I can't see her anywhere."

Buck moved through the group, looking for the girl. He could not find her. He was quick to note that Sid Latham was gone, too. Well, it wasn't *his* daughter, nor was Latham his son—at that thought, there arose in him a wry sense of humor, for he had no daughter or son. Maybe later, when a man got ready to settle down, when he met the right woman. . . . He talked with Betty's father, who told him Betty had gone home to do the chores. Buck nodded, told about the mother's anxiety, but did not, of course, mention the fact that young Latham had left, too.

"My ol' woman is always worryin'," the father grumbled. "She worried the day we got hitched. The ol' buggy broke right down out of Ligonier, back in Indiana, an'— Say, how about you takin' a swaller or two, Buck?"

Buck declined, with thanks. Tortilla Joe was not drinking, either, he noticed. But his partner seemed to be having a good time. He was swing-

ing the women around, his wide face sporting a dark, wide smile. Buck got him aside and told him teasingly that if Margarita could see him she would cut his throat with her dullest butcher knife.

"She no got strings on me, Buck."

"She'd like to have them."

One man said, "Where the hell is John Powers, the skunk?" He answered his own question. "Got us out here, collected his fee, an' then deserted us."

"Good riddance," Betty's father claimed.

"I say the same," a woman declared.

One man said, "That fat guy that got off the stage—his name is Jacob Mudd. I was back in the hills today, scoutin' aroun', an' you know what I done seen, men?"

"A skunk."

"Yeah, a skunk. A two-legged one, though, on hossback."

"Matt Williams?"

"No, this fat gink—this Mudd. You know where he rid to?"

"Carl, you're full of questions. Where did Mudd go?"

"Rode over to see John Powers, he did."

That silenced them. They looked at each other and wondered. Buck did some thinking, too—

did this all tie in in some manner? He remembered how Mudd had looked at him and Tortilla Joe there in the Ringbone postoffice after they had manhandled the arrogant Cross in a Circle hireling, the postmaster. Mudd's heavily lidded eyes had held a silent appraisal—the look a cow buyer gets when he looks over a bull he intends to purchase. A scheming, appraising look, a look that penetrates, weighs and judges.

"Wonder who he is an' what he wanted with Powers?"

"I dunno, Jones."

Suddenly somebody said, "Hey, look over that way—over toward the hills. There's a house on fire, over there!"

Instantly the fiddle stopped. Dancers stopped in the middle of a step. They all stared toward the east. There, over the rim of a rugged hill, was a red glow against the moonlight—a glow made by a fire.

For a moment, then, silence held the group, and in this silence Buck glimpsed fear—the deadly fear of night-riders, of guns, of destructive fire. Beside him stood Betty's mother.

"That's our—home!" she gasped.

Instantly all was confusion. Teams were harnessed to rigs, riders hit for their saddles—horses wheeled, people talked, and then riders went out, dust rising behind them. And Buck McKee

and his partner headed them on the wild night ride.

Tortilla Joe leaned low, hollered, "Matt Weeliams, he ees strike again, no, Buck?"

"He's hit again," Buck hollered back.

Chapter EIGHTEEN

JOHN POWERS said, suddenly, "Riders ahead, Mudd!" And he and the heavy-set man put their broncs into the high buckbrush. They dismounted and went to the heads of their horses and held their hands over the distended nostrils to keep them from whinnying. They were hidden by brush, and they were secure. The hoofs came closer, and John Powers thought, "Quite a few riders," and he waited. Then, they poured around the bend of the hill, moonlight sharp and bright around them, with the dust a fine silver in the moonlight, with the roar of their hoofs harsh against the night.

John Powers watched.

They slanted around the hill, riding hard, and they passed about a hundred yards away, heading for the east. John Powers got the smell of sweaty horseflesh, and they were gone, then; they were around the hill and out of sight, with only the mocking echoes of their hoofs floating back.

"Who was that?" Jacob Mudd asked.

Powers grunted, "Luck is with us, Jacob. That

was none other than his Royal Nibs, the Heir Apparent."

"Talk sense," Mudd growled.

"That was Matt Williams and his men! They've left the Cross in a Circle to raise hell with a nester, and now we move in while they are gone."

"They'll have a guard out, don't worry."

Powers mounted, remembering the riders, and he wondered where they were going, and who, on this silent night, would be their victim. He remembered how Matt Williams had headed them, a rifle across his saddle, and he remembered the moonlight reflecting from the rifle's barrel. Williams had ridden with urgent haste.

Powers thought, "This is another card in my hand," and he realized things were working out the way he wanted. The nesters, he knew, were on Ringbone Creek, welcoming Buck McKee: while they were there the Cross in a Circle would burn down some more of their property. Well, more power to Matt Williams. Now, after he and Jacob Mudd had accomplished their night's work, Williams would be further incensed against the sodmen.

They climbed a small hill, their broncs laboring against the pull of gravity, and, from the height, John Powers looked back to see the Cross

in a Circle riders in the distance—moving pinpoints on the breast of the moonlit plain. One rider was leading them, his bronc some distance ahead of the main body of horsemen, and Powers guessed that impatience was a living, driving force in Matt Williams. And, on this point, he was absolutely correct.

One of Williams' scouts had come in to tell him the nesters were on Ringbone Creek, welcoming to their ranks Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe. The scout had met them about a mile out of the home ranch, and the riders had gathered around him as he drew rein.

"Matt?"

"What is it, man?"

"Them nesters, they're all on Ringbone Crick, waitin' for Buck McKee. He done took up homesteads today—him an' that Mex pard of his'n."

"I know that."

"Well, Matt, I jest told you. No use to bit so hard-boiled about it. They're there, an' their shacks is deserted, I'd say."

"Where we headin' for?" a rider wanted to know.

Ag Keller said, "Thet nester at the foot of Eagle Butte. Thet one thet's got thet purty daughter named Betty." He rolled his big eyes. "Lord, is she a beauty. If'n I could ever get both arms around her—"

"What would you do?" challenged Matt Williams.

Keller grinned crookedly, but had no answer. The rest of the Cross in a Circle riders laughed, but the laugh was not healthy. It was too curt and abrupt and it lacked a genuine tone. It was the tight laughter of tense men.

"Her father is at the meetin'," the scout informed them. "She's there, too. She's sweet on a punk farmer, ain't she?"

"Oh, hell," Keller groaned, feigning disgust. "Somebody always steals my women. Can't keep a one of 'em for myself."

But there was no humor in young Matt Williams. He ordered the scout back into the hills to further spy on the farmers. The man turned and rode away without a word, sensing the sternness of the cowman's mood and not wanting to run against it. Keller sensed this, too, and decided to play along with Williams, and he made the statement that the next time he saw McKee, he intended to shoot him down.

At this information, Matt Williams snorted loudly and said that talk was cheap, but it took money to buy whiskey. Keller said nothing, but his grin was lopsided and ugly—a leering gesture.

"Hit the trail!" Williams ordered, and turned his bronc on his hind legs, walking him around.

Again, they took to the trail, heading east. They skirted the spot where the farmers were having their celebration and they took to the hills for a shortcut.

The trail narrowed, and the riders strung out. They threaded their way along the lip of the cliff. Some would have liked to have slowed down their pace, but Williams knew no slowing down; he knew the trail and he sent his horse along it. Rocks slid and tumbled and landed in the canyon below with the sound of brush being ripped apart, and at one point the trail narrowed dangerously. One horse slipped, slid; his squeal was loud and piercing—a shrill cry of Death. But his rider left the saddle, and, by surging hard against his reins, he jerked the horse back to safety.

Matt Williams' words floated back, "Get on that horse and ride!"

Williams rode with reckless abandon. Somehow, he got the impression that this thing was coming to its end. The sack was closing, the drawstrings were pulling shut, and soon it would be decided. Never did he have any doubt as to the eventual outcome, as to the eventual winner. Always the Cross in a Circle had won. Arrogant, sprawling, the ranch had, since its beginning, lorded it over the rest of the country, and it had run other cow outfits out of the valley—using force, if necessary, to attain its goal. Just as he

would use force on this moonlighted night. . . .

They left the narrow trail, coming to a mesa that was thick with sagebrush and greasewood as high as the shoulders of a horse. He put his bronc across this, his men trailing him. There was another trail, but this went downward and it did not have the cliff for company. A horse slid, a rock echoed; then they were again on the grassy plain of Ringbone Valley. And big Matt Williams drew rein, right hand high in a signal for a conference.

His men crowded around him. Horses breathed with great pants, and sweat was thick on them. Men leaned on stirrups and listened, and they took their orders silently.

"The spread is right over the hill. There might be a guard out. We circle on foot, and if there is a guard —kill him like we killed Maloney. Don't let him get out alive like Hammond got out alive."

Matt Williams let his eyes travel from man to man. "That clear?"

Evidently it was, for nobody answered.

"All right, men, dismount. Smoky, stay with the broncs. Who's got the can of kerosene?"

"Right here, Matt."

"Good. Bring it along."

Smoky held the reins while men melted into the surrounding brush and the hills. Kerosene gurgled in the can. Williams moved to the south,

Ag Keller with him, and they came out of the brush. The homestead shack was below them and to the north a hundred yards.

Keller stopped, peered down at the shack. He was an immobile bulk of humanity, eyes straining.

"What'd you see?"

"Thought mebbe I seen somethin' move down there."

"Nobody there, the scout said."

"He might have made a misttake," Keller grumbled. "Reckon I never saw nobody. Hey, what is that?"

Somebody had darted out of the cabin. A rifle talked and the man stumbled, hitting the ground hard. He rolled over, landed in a heap, and did not move. The sound of the rifle was loud. Mingled with it was the sharp cry of a girl. She ran for the brush, and Keller shot; Williams shot, too. Twin bullets lanced flame into the moonlight. But she ran swiftly, and the brush claimed her; one moment they saw her, the next moment she was gone.

Keller gasped, "That was Betty! She had a gink in the cabin with her— Who the hell is he?"

"I don't know. He's over there."

"I'll catch her," Keller grunted, and ran into the brush.

Williams heard him crash through wild rose-brushes and thick buckbush. Matt Williams thought, "He'll never catch her," and he moved

forward. He came to the prone figure and knelt and he turned the man over. He was dead; his heart had been almost ripped from his body; a .30-30 cartridge had done that. His head lopped back and Williams saw that the dead man was in his late teens. He looked up at one of his riders who said, "That's thet farmer's kid—name is Sid Latham. He's dead, eh?"

"Plumb dead."

Matt Williams got to his feet. He wiped his hands carefully on his pants. He got the smell of kerosene and he heard it gurgling from the can. He said, "Save some for the out-buildings. We burn them, too."

"All right, Matt."

Williams spoke to two riders. "Throw this gent's body into the building. Hell, don't open the window! Do like this. Here, you grab that side of him. Now get his carcass swinging. One, two, three—let go of him."

The body of Sid Latham crashed through the window and hit the floor. A match did its work, and the flames danced up the dried log building. Another match lit the henhouse, then the barn.

Keller came back, puffing like a windbroken horse. "She—she got away, boss. We'd best get outa here pronto!"

"Why?"

Keller stood there and studied Matt Williams' face that was lighted by the glow of the fires. His

mouth opened and he said, "Why? Them farmers'll see this fire, an' they'll come hell-bent for election thisaway—"

"Let 'em come!"

Keller showed a toothy, savage smile. "I can see your point now. This oughta drive the gutless hyenas into action, 'specially with that dead kid in the flames. This oughta drive them to guns. But we want the fight on our terms, not theirs, don't we?"

A rider came piling down off the hills, his bronc running wildly. He was the scout who had told them about the nesters meeting with McKee and Tortilla Joe on Ringbone Creek.

"The Cross in a Circle, Matt! It's on fire!"

"What?"

The guard said, "So help me, Matt, they's a fire at the ranch. A big one, too. Look, you kin see the color ag'in the sky from here!"

They swiveled, and they looked. For a moment nobody spoke. The flames crackled, hens squalled in the burning henhouse, and flames made dancing wild shadows on the parched earth.

"Those dirty farmers!" Matt Williams ground out his words. "They've fired my ranch! There'll be flame and death across this valley tonight! This is the showdown!"

"You said it," Ag Keller affirmed.

Chapter NINETEEN

WHEN THE GUARD heard the movement of a man ahead in the brush, he left his hiding place in the shadow of a cottonwood tree and he moved silently ahead, working toward that movement. He never heard the man come in behind him. All he knew was that suddenly an arm encircled his neck from the rear. The knife rose, came in, found his heart.

Then the guard was falling, his knees bending, and John Powers stood there, legs spread wide, the knife red in his hands. And the lips of John Powers showed a crooked, satanical grin.

"I got him, friend," Powers said quietly.

The brush made its sounds, and Jacob Mudd's massive bulk moved closer. "We did it, eh? I made a good decoy, huh?"

"You did all right."

Mudd looked down at the murdered man. "He didn't even cry out," he said. "He just folded and went down. Is he dead?"

"His heart got the knife."

Mudd said, "I'll make sure." Laboriously he crooked a heavy knee and went down to the sod

and his hand felt along the man's throat. Powers watched and finally said, "He's dead. I got the guard at Yuma the same way. He never said a word, either; his knees just turned to Gila River water. Come on, let's get moving, man! This gent is out of it for good."

Mudd got to his feet, an elephant rising out of the bog. "He's dead all over," he said. "Now for some fire." Suddenly he stopped, stiff in the moonlight. "Might be another guard out."

"There ain't."

"How do you know?"

"I've scouted this outfit for months. This gent was always left behind as a guard. I watched his path for some time now."

"Hope you're right."

"I am right."

They had a coal-oil can tied to a saddle. Mudd got this, a waddling bear of a man, and his immense hands shook it, and a chuckle came from the cavity of his huge belly—he liked the sound of the liquid gurgling in the can. Already John Powers had moved into the clearing, and he stood there—a man openly defined against the moonlight, clear to the eyes of a possible watcher, had there been one.

Mudd thought, "He's got bravery," and he felt the tremble of fear in his own gross muscles as he

moved forward, the grass crunching under his boots.

"Where at first?"

Calmly, John Powers stood there, looking at the immense ranch. He seemed to be studying the possible best angle to strike from—what building would be burned first? He wet his thumb and tested the direction of the wind.

Evidently this direction pleased him. He smiled. "The bunkhouse first. Then the flames will sweep to the house, if this wind holds its velocity and direction."

"I don't like standing out here in the open," Mudd said, and his voice was not too calm.

"You sound a little like you're scared, Jacob?"

"I am."

Powers said, "There's an old hostler on the ranch, but he's asleep in the haymow of the barn."

"There is? He might come awake—"

"He sleeps sound."

Powers went across the clearing. From behind the house came the sudden wild barking of the hounds in their pens. Evidently they had just smelled the intruders. Jacob Mudd openly appeared startled and for a moment Powers thought the fat man would run.

"They're in pens, Mudd."

"For Gawd's sake, don't use my name!"

Powers played ignorant. "You ashamed of your name?"

"You know what I mean!"

The hounds kept on barking. They made wild, mournful sounds that echoed and re-echoed through the hills, sounds that rolled and lifted and bounced and then died. Powers noticed that Mudd glanced hurriedly toward the barn. This made the land-locator smile, and he then told Mudd that the old hostler was completely deaf. This helped Mudd, and he showed a sickly face as he tried to smile—a gray, ashen face, bloated and with heavy gray jowls.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Wanted to make you suffer."

Mudd said, "Talk sense. I'm not afraid. Here, now, here we are at the bunkhouse, and let's get to work. Sprinkle the kerosene along the side here, and then I'll light it."

"Inside!" Powers said.

Mudd stared at him, eyes strained. "Might be somebody sleeping in there," he croaked.

"What if there is? We'll kill him."

"You go—first."

Powers grabbed Mudd by the collar of his shirt. He twisted, dragging the collar into the fat neck, and he pushed Mudd ahead, the man gasping and lurching. Mudd slammed through the bunkhouse's door and fell to the floor inside. He made

a crashing sound, like that of a beef slipping from a scaffold.

"Who's home?" Powers demanded.

There was no answer. There were only two sounds: the wind outside, soughing in the overhang of the roof, talking against the sides of the building—and there was the coarse animal breathing of Jacob Mudd, who still sat on the floor.

"Nobody here but us," Powers said, and he added: "Get to your feet, Mudd. Here, you sprinkle this kerosene."

Mudd lumbered up, said, "John, you had no call to treat me that way," and to this Powers had no answer. Powers stood there, smelling the gloomy interior of the long room—the smell of dirty socks, of unwashed blankets, of shaving lotion and saddle leather. Then, with these smells came another—a sharp, alien smell that quickly permeated the room. The smell of kerosene.

Powers heard the gurgle of the kerosene leaving the can, and he heard the massive tread of Jacob Mudd, and the thought came: "How can a body so big know such great fear as he showed?" Powers saw the big form move, heard the last of the kerosene leave the can.

Mudd's whisper was coarse. "I put it all over the bedding and on the wall. Now what do I do?"

"Light it afire!"

"It'll burn fast."

"We want it to burn fast."

Mudd lit the match. Through the dense darkness came the sudden stab of light, the flare of a match. Mudd's hands cupped this, and the flame showed his red flesh, and he moved over to a bunk, touching the burning match against the kerosene-soaked blankets. Now the flame grew, and it showed Mudd's wide face. Powers watched that face, almost fascinated by it, as Mudd stared at the growing flame. Evidently the flame held some great fascination for Mudd. It lit his face, showing the dark circles under his eyes, the great ugly nose, the thick lips and heavy jaw.

Finally Powers said, "We'd best leave, Mudd."

Mudd pivoted, moving quickly despite his weight, and he looked at Powers. Flames showed the interior of the building clearly and the heat and smoke was gathering.

"We ought to break a window for air to come in so it could burn better."

"From the outside," Powers said.

Mudd moved toward the door, and now he coughed in smoke. "We got the thing on fire," he said, and he sounded like a triumphant little boy. "We'll make that big Matt Williams sweat."

Mudd was out of the door when the rifle talked. The bullet hit into the side of the bunkhouse. Mudd hollered something, and he went down,

and behind him came John Powers, who swiftly raised his rifle. Powers shot and a man screamed in the haymow window of the barn.

Powers saw him clearly, for moonlight etched him. He saw the twinkle of steel, and he realized he had scored a hit—the man had dropped his rifle. Through the roar he grunted, "That ol' hostler," and he shot again.

He saw the old fellow grab at the frame of the haymow opening, and he heard him scream. Then he saw the body falling, twisting as it came down, and he saw the man hit the ground, landing on his rifle.

The hounds were roaring behind the house—a wild canine cacophony of sound. Behind him suddenly there was a roar in the bunkhouse and he turned; then tension left—some cartridges had exploded. He pulled at Mudd and said, "Where did he get you, Mudd?" and he got Mudd to his feet. The man's face was drained of blood, and his lips trembled.

"He—he didn't hit me—"

Powers said, "Oh, for Gawd's sake," and he slapped Mudd across the jowls.

The man took it, and then, for a moment, dark hell flared in his eyes, and Powers saw this.

"Come on, you fool!"

They walked across the clearing. Powers moved over to the body of the old hostler as he

passed and he kicked the man in the head. Behind them the bunkhouse roared as flames took it. Rafters stood out, wrapped by flame; sparks flew with wild abandon; the wind moved against the burning building, giving it ventilation and draft.

"We broke no window," Mudd croaked.

"Get on your bronc, and we leave here, Mudd."

Mudd went into saddle with swift alacrity. Never before had Powers seen the gross man mounted in such a hurry. Powers turned his horse and the fire showed in the wild distended eyeballs of his bronc.

Powers studied the burning building. "One little match did it all," he said, and then he turned his bronc to spur after Mudd, who already was crashing his way through the Wyoming buckbrush.

A rosebush whipped back, dragging claws across his face. He cursed it with a methodical easiness.

He finally caught Jacob Mudd's bronc.

He said, "You ride fast."

"A bullet comes fast," Mudd said.

Finally they gained a ridge. They breathed their broncs, and the only sounds were the rise and fall of horse-flanks, the creak of saddle leather. Beyond them the flame kissed the Wyoming sky.

Jacob Mudd said, "What's next, John?"

"We join forces with Matt Williams."

Mudd peered at his partner. "Who," he asked the wide night, "is crazy now?" And he saw that Powers sported a secretive smile.

"We join forces with Matt Williams," Powers said. "We tell him about this tin, and this fortune here. Then we lead him against the nesters."

"Yeah?"

"We got to get rid of McKee and his Mexican. If we kill them, then the farmers will hightail out —those who are left alive."

"How about the squaw?"

Powers studied him, surprise showing. "What squaw?"

"This one of Big Bob's. Many Feathers, or whatever her name is."

"What makes you ask that question?"

"I don't like Indians," Jacob Mudd said. "Oh, well, forget it, and let's ride, Powers."

Mudd led the way, wide in his saddle.

Powers followed, and he pondered on the man's words. Why had Mudd dragged the name of Many Feathers into this? She was only a dumb plodding squaw, and Matt Williams had kicked her out.

Powers gave up. He decided there were some things a man could never and would never understand. One of these incomprehensible items was

his fellow men. Then he left this thought, also, and worried on the problems that lay ahead.

They rode through the moonlight, heading for Powers' homestead. . . .

Chapter TWENTY

Buck McKee pulled his horse to a sliding halt and held up his hand as a signal for the farmers to rein in also. Beside him Tortilla Joe sent his bronc back on his haunches.

"You see somethin' ahead, Buck?"

Buck said, "Somebody on foot, comin' this way. Down in that little valley ahead of us, see?"

"I see heem now. He come on foot, like you say."

Back of Buck rode Betty's father. Now he stood on his stirrups, gaunt and tall in the moonlight, and he peered and he said, "Lord, let it be my little girl. If them skunks has killed her—"

Buck hollered, "Betty!"

The figure stopped, stared up at them. The bottom of the little valley was dark with shadows; therefore recognition was impossible. Buck cupped his hands to his mouth and repeated his call.

Then, the echoes died; they waited. From the figure below came a weak cry. "This is Betty; this is Betty."

Her father spurred ahead, going down the slope

on sliding haunches, his bronc braced against the steepness of the slant. He rode like a man possessed with the devil, a man who paid no attention to danger or to the possibilities of his bronc falling. Behind him came Buck and Tortilla Joe, broncs braced on haunches, coming down with jarring jolts.

Behind them, dust lifting into the moonlight, rode the farmers. Rifles were held high, moonglow reflected from their steel barrels, and a grimness was with them—a grimness laden with danger and anger toward the Cross in a Circle cow outfit. By the time Buck and his Mexican partner had dismounted, Betty's father was beside her, holding her in his arms as she sat wearily on the grass.

Her father was praying, his lips close to her hair, and his words made Buck stop and take off his hat. The solemness of the moment gripped the others, and they stood in silence, until the farmer had said, "Amen."

Only then did Buck kneel beside the tired girl. "What happened, Betty?"

With sobbing voice, she told about the night-riders. When she told about Sid Latham going down under lead she broke into wild weeping. Buck stood up and his eyes met those of her father, kneeling on the ground beside his daughter.

And when her father spoke his voice was hollow and weak.

"They were betrothed, Mr. McKee. Only I knew it, for her mother would have objected, and she would have said she was too young to marry. They have met many times secretly, and I have known it. . . . Come, daughter, try to stand up, please."

Buck asked, "Who were they?"

She did not know. The night had hid them, the rifles had talked; they had shot at her, too, but they had missed.

Her father said, in a croaking voice, "They—they shot at you, too? Shot at a girl?"

Rage was a living force in the eyes of Betty's father. But no rage could equal that of Mike Latham. He swore with terrible frenzy. His curses rolled from his lips. Even Buck, hardened as he was, wanted to ask the man to cease.

"If they have killed my boy—"

Buck said, "Come on, men. Betty, stay with your father. He'll take you home." Buck waved his rifle over his head as a signal for them to follow him. Tortilla Joe was already spurring out ahead of him.

Buck used his quirt to catch the Mexican, for he had jammed his Winchester into the saddle scabbard. They streaked across the flat, and dust

lifted; behind them, the farmers, best riding slower horses, fell back. Gradually Buck overhauled his partner. The Mexican rode like an immense jockey, high on his stirrups, his rump sticking out, and his head down low against the neck of his laboring horse.

"Matt Weeliams, he do thees," Tortilla hollered.

"Might have been Powers," Buck said. "He's got some dirty scheme up his dirty sleeve. He might be workin' both ends against the middle."

The Mexican shook his head with dogged insistence. "Thees time, Buck, I am the right, no? Powers he have only thees man Mudd weeth heem. Betty say many riders they burn down the shack."

"That's right," Buck said.

Suddenly, Buck pulled in his bronc. The horse cake-walked, fighting the bit; he slashed with his forelegs against the air, then settled down. Riders came around them, and dust was acrid and sharp, and saddles creaked and horsehoofs made brittle sounds on rock.

"What is it, McKee?"

"What's ahead, Buck?"

Buck hollered, "Be quiet, men, and listen."

Some dismounted and held their broncs' noses to stifle loud breathing. Tortilla Joe went down and laid an ear against the earth, a dark mass of

humanity keening the soil for sound. Then they heard the sounds. They came across the immensity of this Wyoming land, and the wind took them to their ears.

"Horses," a farmer grunted. "Runnin' somewhere in the night. But from what direction do those hoof noises come, men?"

"From the direction of the Cross in a Circle," Tortilla Joe said. "Many riders too; they ride fast." He stood on his knees and said, "Look, hombres, at the Cross een the Circle. Fires!"

They stood there, transfixed and staring, and they looked in the direction of the Williams' ranch. There, arching against the sky, was the fire. It had long, red tongues that seemed to lick away the blackness of the night. But this time the sound of the running horses had died against the space of far distance, and Buck added all this together, coming to a rapid total.

"The Cross in a Circle has ride to fire Betty's father's shack. Then, while they were gone, somebody sneaked in an' set fire to their spread. Looks to me like the whole home ranch is on fire."

"Hope it roars up in smoke," a farmer growled. "I hope the whul stinkin' outfit burns down to bare ashes, I do so help me!"

Tortilla Joe asked, "Any farmers not at the peecneec, mens?"

"We were all there," a man replied. "Why

ask—" Then he got the implication of the Mexican's question. "If we were all at the gathering, then who set fire to the Williams' ranch?"

"Yeah," another cut in, *"who did?"*

Buck said, "John Powers wasn't there."

One man crossed himself. "I do not like this idea," he intoned. "I am not one to fight fire with fire. I am a man of peace. This thing could have been settled within the confines of the law—"

"No, it couldn't," a man retorted. "Only gun law can settle this, Reverend. I hate to say that but there is no other answer."

Buck said, "Come on, men."

There was nothing to be gained by argument. The second man was right in Buck's estimation: guns would settle this. Somebody had set fire to the Williams' ranch. Suddenly he thought of the squaw Many Feathers. She hated Matt Williams, and she might have sneaked away from the Smith farm, and possibly she could have set fire to the Cross in a Circle outfit. Buck dallied with that thought and then threw it bodily to one side; he decided he would check with Sandra, who had stayed at the cabin with Many Feathers and young Paul Hammond.

Buck realized that the fair-haired girl seemed to have a great interest in Hammond. Maybe that was because the farmer was down-and-out and wounded. But this was not the place, or the time,

to think of Sandra. Accordingly he put her also out of his thoughts. Mike Latham had ridden ahead, wild with haste, torn by fear for his son's safety.

And when Buck and Tortilla Joe and the others rode down on the burning cabin, the farmer was already there. He stood there, helpless against the heat of the ebbing flames, and when he turned Buck saw that his eyes, illuminated by the fierce fire, were bulging and flame-colored, and red hell was in the man's turbulent soul. "I can't find my son, McKee."

Buck gave the shack a quick appraisal. Within a few moments the fire would be burned down to the foundation. Already he could see the twisted frame of an iron bedstead in the ruins.

"The wind can't hit the fire here," a man said, "because of the hill behind the house. A few of us can stay close to keep it from spreadin' and the rest of us can search the brush."

Tortilla Joe said, "I help search, Buck."

Buck detailed two men to watch the fire. They would stamp out any brands or curb all attempts that the fire made to spread. They had buckets of water they had pulled from the pump and they stationed these at handy intervals. Buck and the others looked in the brush for young Latham. Buck figured that the search was useless. He remembered the first night he had ridden in on

Ringbone range, and he remembered the Cross in a Circle riders roaring down on him, and he remembered how his gun had lifted and talked; he remembered, also how the man named Tony had suddenly sagged against the fork of his saddle, with Buck's bullet killing him.

On that night, Williams had made a night raid also. He had burned down Jack Maloney's cabin, and the body of Maloney had been in the fire—a body riddled through with rifle and short-gun bullets. Such, he figured, would be the case with young Sid Latham.

Mike Latham was a madman, one moment searching for his son, the next moment spewing curses at Matt Williams and his crew. Again and again the man demanded that the farmers band and ride for the Cross in a Circle. Buck said nothing, but he was against this plan. He figured that Matt Williams wanted the farmers to do just this. Matt would then pick his own battleground; that would be a point in his favor; he could also ambush the farmers, for they were not experts at this rough-and-tumble form of fighting. But what the farmers did, he reasoned, was none of his business. Only, after meeting them, he had to admit some were right nice people—good people.

Men crashed through the brush, calling Sid Latham's name, ranging further and further out from the fire, making circles of exploration.

Once a man called, "Here he is!" and hope ran its brief brittle length. Mike Latham hollered, "I'm coming, son," and Buck heard his body accelerate speed, with greater crackling of buck-brush.

A man said, "His only kin. If the boy is dead in the fire it will kill him, McKee."

Buck waited, listening.

Then the first voice said, "Hell, it ain't him, Matt. It was a log, layin' here under the rocks—jest the length of Sid."

Mike Latham cursed the man.

The man said, "Mike, I'm your neighbor, an' please don't talk to me that way, huh, Mike?"

"Somebody hollered over that way," a man called.

That man, also, had called falsely. Buck said, "Keep on searching," and they continued. Within an hour, the fire had burned down, and Tortilla Joe came and said, "Buck, where are you?"

"Over here."

Moonlight showed the soot-blackened wide face of the Mexican. "Buck, he ees een the fire. I can see hees body there."

"Be tough on his father."

Tortilla Joe crossed his massive bosom, his stubby forefinger moving rapidly. "Eet ees the weel of God," he murmured.

"I'll hate to see Mike Latham's face."

Already the word had reached Mike Latham. When Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe reached the site of the burned-down cabin, Mike Latham lay on the ground on his belly. His head buried in the dust, he sobbed broken-heartedly. Buck had never seen a man show such emotion.

Farmers stood around occasionally glancing at the object in the ashes, then down at Mike Latham. Latham crawled to Buck and grabbed his pant leg and raised his face.

Buck looked down into a face suddenly old, suddenly aged. He looked down at eyes as burned-out as holes in a saddle blanket.

"McKee, I was wrong. This is not the job for one man. This is a job for all of us, for every man present."

Buck nodded, not trusting speech.

Again those cracked, trembling lips moved. "First, they killed Jack Maloney, a fine lad—my son's best friend. Then they shot Paul Hammond, and with God's help he will recover. Now my son is dead in there and his sweetheart is heart-broken."

Nobody spoke.

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican swallowed, his eyes dog-sad. Buck thought of Betty. That was the trouble with love—you grew to love somebody and then you had to lose him or

her, and that was when your heart went between the jaws of the vise of Fate.

"McKee, we trust you. Powers called you and Mr. Tortilla Joe in because of your gun speed; he tricked you. McKee, lead us against Matt Williams!"

Buck said nothing. Eyes were on him—probing, questioning eyes. Mike Latham swallowed, and you could almost hear the gesture, he gulped so laboriously.

Mike Latham's voice was a cracked sound. "McKee, you and your partner know this brush fighting; we don't. Give me your answer, McKee."

Buck's eyes met those of Tortilla Joe, who nodded.

Buck said, "On one condition, men."

"And what is that?" Gladness was a rough file in Latham's voice.

"I am the boss—the complete boss. You obey me at all times."

"All right with me," a man said.

One by one, the farmers went by and shook hands with Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe, and thus, standing there beside the body of the burned youth, their agreement was made . . . and sealed.

Tortilla Joe said, "Eet weel be a tough one, Buck."

Buck McKee only nodded.

Chapter TWENTY-ONE

SHE STOOD THERE in the yard of the McKee-Tortilla Joe farm and she looked at Buck McKee with dark fathomless eyes. She was stolid and wide and her face was dark and her face hid its thoughts.

Buck said, "Did you burn down the Williams' outfit, Many Feathers?"

She shook her head. She wore big earrings and these made a clanking sound. "Me no burn it down."

"Then who did?"

She studied him patiently. She seemed to have all the time in the world. She took her eyes from Buck and put them on Tortilla Joe.

"Woman out lookin' for you, Tortilla. She come from town on mule an' look for you. White woman."

Tortilla Joe spat on his hands, grinned, took a harder grip on his axe. "Margarita," he told the world in general. "She came over this way but I ducked een the brush. She ees after me for the marriage."

Buck felt the raw rasp of impatience in-

side him. This Crow squaw kept evading his questions.

"If you didn't burn the spread down, who did? I got reports that during the fire you were away from the Smith cabin. Where were you, woman?"

This was the second day after the fire had burned down most of the big Cross in a Circle ranch. Buck and Tortilla Joe already had part of their log house up—in fact, they had the bottom tier of logs in place, about five logs high. They seemed in no rush to get it any higher.

"Me, I on trip."

"Where did you go?" Buck was persistent.

Sandra Smith listened, sitting on a log. She had ridden to tell them that young Paul Hammond was sitting up. Buck had detected a bright happy glow in her dark eyes. He noticed, also, that she was not so interested in him. She had, in fact, almost ignored him, talking mostly to Tortilla Joe. And her talk, he had noticed also, centered around young Hammond.

Many Feathers looked at Sandra, eyes sharp behind their wrinkled lids. "You tell him I go from your cabin?"

"Yes, I did."

"You should not do that."

"I had to. We're in this all together, Many Feathers. Buck is our leader and each of us has to work with him."

"Him good leader."

Tortilla Joe swung his axe with much vigor. The blade slashed into a branch and peeled it from the log he was trimming. "All the time there ees troubles weeth the womans," he grunted.

Sandra said, "Well, if that is the case, I'll go home then." She smiled at Buck, but her smile did not hold that old warmth and Buck was glad for that. The girl mounted, riding sidesaddle, and rode away. Many Feathers watched her. Buck watched the Crow woman's impassive face.

"Where were you?" Buck repeated.

Tortilla Joe leaned on his axe handle and watched, but said nothing. Back on the slope a cow bawled to her calf. Down along the creek a bluejaw scolded from his perch in a cottonwood tree. His raucous sounds were sharp in the morning's still air.

Many Feathers had not left them after she had ridden in the morning after the fire. She had slept back in the hills somewhere and Buck and Tortilla Joe had slept in the timber on the ridge. She never let the two get out of her sight. Just now, she seemed reluctant to talk.

"You ride over and burn down the Cross in a Circle?" Buck asked for the tenth time.

"This mans they call Mudd," she said, "he go around with a little hammer. He pound on rocks and look at them."

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe, who shrugged.

Buck had watched Mudd through field glasses. He had done some mental arithmetic, matching cause against effect, and he had come to the conclusion that John Powers and Jacob Mudd wanted Ringbone valley because of some mineral content. He did not know what this mineral was. He was sure it was not gold or silver. Prospectors had worked this country thoroughly and had left the marks of their callings—"gopher holes"—dug back into hills in search of veins.

"He look for something, maybe?"

Buck pounded one hand against the other. "Many Feathers, did you or did you not set the William's spread on fire?"

"Why you want to know, McKees?"

Buck explained carefully, using the simplest words he could summon. If she had not set the spread on fire, then somebody else had; if you were going to fight somebody, you had to know who your enemy was, and where he was located.

"I no light him," she said. "I no know who burn him down."

Buck said, "That's all I want to know."

Tortilla Joe rubbed his whiskery chin. It sounded like a farmer scraping the bristles off a butchered hog. "Then who she ees burn the outer-feet, Buck?"

"Only two people, I figure. John Powers wasn't at the meeting. Neither was Jacob Mudd."

"We no know for the shore, Buck."

Buck buried his axe in a cottonwood log. He and Tortilla Joe had, for some odd reason, placed a double row of logs for the base of the cabin. They had chopped out sections of these logs, placing one chopped-out area over the other. In this way, they had small windows out of which they could see. Sandra had openly doubted their sanity. Who, she had declared, would lie on his belly to look out a window.

But there were many things about Ringbone valley that Sandra did not realize. One was that the farmers were organized and ready to fight. Within the last few days, Buck and Tortilla Joe had organized them into a bunch of minutemen, ready to band together at a moment's notice.

Some of the farmers, after the death of young Sid Latham, had wanted to ride against the Williams' spread, and that was just what Matt Williams had wanted them to do. With difficulty Buck convinced them it would be best that Williams moved against them, for a man always fought better on his own ground.

Buck's logic had been simple and in its simplicity lay its strength. By all tokens the Williams' gunmen would strike next at him and Tortilla Joe, for by now Williams knew that they were leaders of the farmers. His chore, then, would be to get them out of circulation.

The farmers had nodded, agreeing to this. . . .

Each night saw a guard at each farmer's house.

Back of that house on the hill, hidden in the brush, was a pile of loose wood, thoroughly soaked in kerosene. The minute the Cross in a Circle spread hit at any house the guard would light that pile of coal-oil soaked wood. Flame would instantly flare into the night. Other guards, stationed beside similar woodpiles, would instantly respond, awakening the occupants of that particular house he guarded.

Thus, within a few moments, the entire valley would know whose property was being attacked, for on the hill behind that property the fire would be burning—a blazing tocsin summoning men to battle.

Also, a guard watched the Cross in a Circle.

The squaw started to move away—a massive heap of flesh walking. Then, without warning, she stopped, and she turned her bulk, and she looked at Buck McKee with sharp eyes, then swung her gaze to Tortilla Joe.

"You my friends," she said, and she seemed to be talking to herself. "Years ago my people say this valley cursed with rich rock. But we no talk about that."

Buck waited, watching her. Tortilla Joe's breathing was a rasping animal sound.

"I make lie to you. I see Powers and fat man ride for Cross in Circle. I want to kill Matt Williams, and I watch ranch."

"Yes," Buck said.

"Powers, him an' fat man—they burn the buildings. I see them in the night. They blame it on farmers."

Buck nodded. "Good deal for them, judgin' from their standpoint. So you saw this, eh?"

The heavy head nodded, the earrings making their metallic sounds. "I see that. They kill old man who shoot from the barn."

"I heard that the old hostler got murdered," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe spat, said, "Powers, he worse than Weeliams, Buck. He dirtier, I theenk."

But Many Feathers was not through. She had more news to tell them. She had seen Powers and Jacob Mudd ride into the Cross in a Circle ranch the next morning. She had seen them talking with Matt Williams and Ag Keller. At this news, Buck found himself frowning. Then the full implication of her words registered and he cursed with a wry anger rimming his words.

"Powers an' Williams has joined hands, Tortilla Joe. They've decided to work together, I'll bet."

"Maybe that ees eet."

Buck's eyes grew thoughtful. "I sure would like to know why Powers got the farmers in here, and just what is at stake in this trouble."

"So would I, Buck."

The squaw's eyes moved from one to the other. They were shining beads of black obsidian.

"You got the right answers, eh?"

Buck nodded.

Many Feathers waddled to her old horse. She led the nag over to a log, got on it, and laboriously mounted. Her dress, long and flapping, made mounting difficult. Neither Buck nor Tortilla Joe offered to help her. She would not have accepted their help. She was too independent.

Finally, settled on the old crowbait, she spoke to Buck. "You hand me the rifle, Bucks?"

Buck handed her the old .30-30.

She had a knife in her belt—a long bladed affair in a buffalo-horn scabbard. She put her hand on its handle and checked its security in the holster.

"Where are you going, squaw?" Buck wanted to know.

"I spy on Williams," she said, and her moccasins drummed on the old nag's bony ribs, getting him to a plodding walk. The horse plodded across the clearing and into the hills.

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. Neither spoke for some time. Then the Mexican said, "Eef she meets Weeliams, she weel keel him, Buck."

"She'll sure try."

Chapter TWENTY-TWO

THE AIR was thick with tobacco smoke. Men loafed in chairs, on the couch, and some lay on the floor. Whiskey bottles went the rounds. From outside came the stink of ashes—cold ashes.

Jacob Mudd sat with his back against the wall, gloomily studying John Powers, who sat on the floor across the living room of the Cross in a Circle ranch house. Mudd's ugly wide face showed concern. Mudd wanted to get out of the house. He wanted to pull out and leave all this trouble behind. No metal—tin, gold, silver, lead—was worth a man's life, he figured. But men haven't always figured so. . . .

Beside him, not more than ten feet away, was a rawboned man of about fifty, who squatted and watched Mudd. He was Mudd's bodyguard. Jacob Mudd looked again at John Powers.

Powers got to his feet and walked outside. Out on the porch, another guard loafed; he saw Powers and he moved forward—a thin sallow gunman. He shifted his chew of tobacco and stopped, watching Powers.

Powers said, "It'll be a fine night, fellow."

The guard merely nodded.

Powers looked into the dusk. "Moonlight and stars tonight," he said.

Again, the guard nodded.

Powers felt a touch of irritation that drew his lips down. "You talk too much," he growled. "Where is Matt Williams?"

"He'll be back soon."

"I'll walk around."

The guard moved with him. Other guards watched. The place, Powers saw, was spiked with guards. A wryness entered the land-locator and made him show a tight smile. He and Jacob Mudd were prisoners of Matt Williams.

He could see Williams' logic. He and Mudd had laid their cards face-up on the table and Williams didn't trust them any further than he could throw a bull-calf by his tail. That was good wisdom on the part of Matt Williams. John Powers knew what reasoning motivated this act. Williams was afraid he and Jacob Mudd were double-crossing both the farmers and the Cross in a Circle outfit.

Williams undoubtedly figured he, Powers, could work both factions, keeping one posted on the other's doings or preparations. Then, when the time came for a surprise attack, there would be no surprise about it—the other side would be tipped off by Powers. And cowpunchers and farmers would fight to a finish, and, when the last

shot was fired, Powers would be the winner. He would have eliminated each menace while he sat on the sidelines and cheered.

Williams was not chancing this.

Powers walked around the yard, glad to be able to stretch his legs. He stopped at each burned building and stood and looked at the ashes. Dusk gathered and down by the creek a curlew chipped as he flew low across the long grass. Snipes ran along the edge of the stream and raised their sharp voices. Impatience in him, Powers turned again toward the house, and then Matt Williams and Ag Keller rode into the yard. Powers stopped and waited.

They dismounted in front of him; neither spoke. Ag Keller finally said to the hostler, "Saddle me a fresh horse, fellow. That black stud of mine."

"Saddle by blue roan," Matt Williams said.

Powers said, "Well?" and he made the word a question.

Williams grinned. He was dusty and big and brawny, and hell was in his harsh eyes. "This is the night, Powers."

"We hit tonight?"

"We wipe them out . . . tonight."

Powers felt something grip his throat. He had long looked forward to this moment, and now that it had arrived he did not know just what to think. He stood and looked at Williams for a long mo-

ment and then he said, "We hit at McKee and the Mexican?"

Keller cut in with, "Matt, I'm goin' to the house an' git the boys ready, eh?"

"Do that, Ag!"

Keller bowlegged toward the porch, batwing chaps whispering, his spur rowels making their metallic sounds.

Powers repeated, "We hit at McKee?"

Williams beat dust off his chaps with his hat. "No," he finally said. "We don't hit at McKee."

"Why not? He's the enemy. Get him an' his Mex an' these farmers'll run like scared cottontails."

Williams carefully recreased his hat. "McKee and the Mex have a fortress built, Powers. They act like they're building a house, but they ain't. They got about six logs high and about two deep. They aim to use it as a fort. They figure we'll hit at them, seeing they're the leaders."

"They are the leaders."

"But we don't hit there. We're not running against the enemy's hard spots, fellow. We're hittin' at another spot, savvy."

"Where do we hit?"

But Matt Williams had already moved away, heading for the house. John Powers watched him, blind rage in him; Williams had disregarded his question entirely. Powers felt a little helpless, and

a lot more angry. Then logic came in and buried his anger under the cloak of discretion.

He followed the owner of the Cross in a Circle. Williams stopped on the steps, and he looked at the ruins of the burned-down buildings, and Powers saw the terrible driving hatred in his eyes. His lips even trembled. Powers saw this and felt fear: Williams would kill the man who did this. Powers thought of Jacob Mudd and his watery eyes. Mudd was weak. He might tell Matt Williams that he and Powers had burned down the Cross in a Circle buildings. Williams would lift his gun against him, if he knew this; Powers decided, then and there, to kill Mudd. Kill him to silence his thick lips.

This would be the night to kill Mudd. Under cloak of darkness, in the middle of the gunfight—Mudd would be killed. Powers made this decision, stored it in his mind, and moved behind Williams into the ranch house with its curses, its smell of raw whiskey, its smoking, grumbling, impatient men.

Williams said, "Up and in saddle, men."

They came off the floor with noisy gear, they threw down cards and pushed back chairs, and a couple stored quart whiskey bottles in their chap pockets. A young man hitched his .45 around to the front of his hip, picked up a Winchester .25-

35, and he said, with twisted lips, "This is the time, eh, Matt?"

"This is it, Froggy."

"War is like love," the young man said to the world in general. "Both make a man impatient. When both are over, a man is either alive or dead, and the sun still rises each morning."

"Lissen to him," a man purred. "Lissen to Socrates."

They trooped out, a noisy, colorful outfit. One spat on the door casing as he went out. Williams saw this and his face darkened, and he remembered how meticulously Many Feathers had kept this house.

In him then arose, from some secret dark being inside, a growing resentment and he thought of Many Feathers. This thought, though, concerned itself with a woman, and women had no place in this. Mildred was gone, the wheels had made their revolutions, and he would never see her again. This hurt him, and this showed momentarily in his face, draining from it its youthful hardness. Then the worldliness returned, and the softness departed under the pressure of the situation.

"Outside, men, and on broncs."

They had horses ready and they lifted their bodies into the dusk. Horses reared and pawed, and rifles sank into boots, their stocks protrud-

ing. Ag Keller reined his black stud; the stud arched his thick neck; the stud wanted to buck. Keller used his quirt and steadied the big horse.

Williams waited, patient now, a dangerous man—dangerous because of youthful ambition.

Jacob Mudd got laboriously into his saddle. He acted as though his legs were raw from riding, for slowly he settled himself in his kak. Powers saw this and Williams saw this and their eyes met and Williams showed his smile only to Powers. Powers grinned. Neither man said anything. A guard rode close to Mudd. Williams held up his hand for silence. For a moment not a horse moved, and the riders had eyes only for the owner of the Cross in a Circle.

Williams said, "The night is still young. There is no need for hurry. The moonlight will be with us within an hour. We ride in a body to the big cottonwood on the bend in Ringbone Crick. We stop there and I give each man his duty assignment. When we hit tonight we hit for the last time."

"We win," Keller said, "or we lose, eh, Matt?"

"That's it. Powers, ride beside me; I want to talk to you."

They rode out at a walk, leaving the ranch house behind. Powers rode close to Williams.

"Not McKee?" Powers asked.

Williams said, "We hit at Pete Smith."

Powers nodded. He saw the logic. He remembered Sandra Smith. He remembered her clean sweet beauty, and Powers seemed a thousand years old—he had no body nor thoughts nor morals nor hope. This feeling passed, and he said, "All right, we hit at Smith. But McKee and the Mex will horn in."

"I'll welcome that, Powers."

Chapter TWENTY-THREE

THE SCOUT rode a horse that had been run hard. The scout said, "They've left the Cross in a Circle. I seen them. This is it, McKee."

"Which way did they go?"

"I never watched them after they headed out. But they aim to hit at us farmers for sure, this time."

"Warn the rest of them," Buck said. "Then watch for the signal fire. You jest come from Smith's farm?"

"Jest come from there. So long."

The scout was gone. They heard him crash through the underbrush, then they heard him no more. Buck looked at Tortilla Joe whose face was sad and homely in the moonlight.

"Thees ees eet, Buck. They heet at us."

"I doubt that."

"Why you say that, Buck?"

"Williams has had scouts out. They've seen us buildin' our shack. We got a fort here and they know it."

"They make examples of us, no?"

Buck said, "We'll wait and see, *amigo*."

They were squatting in the buckbrush on the hill above their homestead. Moonlight was clear and it showed brush and trees and below them was the fine line that was Ringbone Creek. Below them, too, was their fortress—a dark square in the moonlight.

"Where ees the squaw, Buck?"

Buck grunted, "Danged if I'd know. Haven't seen her since this afternoon. She's an odd old gal, eh?"

"She ees the good scout, she ees."

Buck said, "What's her game?"

The Mexican shrugged expansively. Both were silent then, and below them an owl made his talk along the creek.

"Matt Weeliams," said the Mexican. "She wants to keel Matt."

Buck smiled. "Who doesn't?"

Buck sat with his back against a service-berry tree, legs extended. He thought of old Marty Enbright and his Broken Leg outfit, over in Utah. Marty would have a winter job for them. He wished he was riding into the yard of the Broken Leg now. Marty would come running out, waving his arms in welcome, hollering like somebody had just slapped a hot branding iron on his behind. . . .

Suddenly a hand shook Buck. "Come awake, pardner, an' look! Over that way—toward Smeeth's home!"

Buck came awake with a hop, and was on his feet. A fire was burning on the hill back of Pete Smith's farm. A signal fire, leaping toward the sky.

"Smith, eh, and Sandra is there—so is Paul Hammond."

Tortilla Joe ran for his bronc, tied in the brush. "We ride and meet the farmers, down along the creek, no?"

Buck was already mounting. "We meet there pronto," he gritted, and he loped out, horse digging dirt.

Behind them the signal fire licked the sky with flames.

Over at the Jones's farm, the Jones boy saw the signal first. He came into the house. He was sixteen, big for his age; his eyes were wild.

"Dad, the fire—back of Smith's farm!"

His mother, sewing by the table, stared at him, hands suddenly trembling. His eighteen-year-old sister, reading a book, laid it down. His father, also reading, studied him.

"So the time has come, huh, son?"

"They're hitting Smith, Dad!"

Jones was an ex-schoolteacher—a thin, anemic

looking man of forty odd. He put down his book and took his rifle from the corner. "Your rifle is over there, son," he said quietly.

The boy said, "Right behind you, Dad."

Mrs. Jones caught her husband's arm. "I'm going with you, Dad."

"This is for the men, Rachel."

"I go too," the daughter said.

Mrs. Jones said, "When we married we said we would share and share alike, Verne. Somebody will die tonight because man is greedy. If it is you I want to be with you, and with my son."

"I want to be there too," the daughter said.

Jones looked at his wife. He looked at his daughter. He said, "God is with the weak, and we are the weak. Death is a small item, for we all meet again in a Better Land. Get your pistols and we ride, family!"

Down the creek a half mile was the Cartright farm. Cartright was a big burly man with dark, shaggy brows. His wife, who had been on guard, brought him news that Smith was being attacked.

"I'm gettin' out of here," Cartright growled. "Smith means nothin' to me. They can kill each other off for John Powers, but I'm leavin'!"

His wife, a thin, flat-breasted woman, said, "Peter, how can you say such a thing?"

"I mean it."

Cartright walked outside, got on his horse, and started to ride away. His wife caught the horse's reins.

"You—you're a coward, Peter?"

"Better to be a live coward than a dead hero. If you want to come along, come, but if you don't, stay."

"You can ride alone!"

The man spat on the ground. "I'm sick and tired of this damned homestead. The first big town I come to I'm gettin' me a purty woman an' we're goin' raise hell. You keep this damned place and I'll pull out."

He rode away.

His wife bit her bottom lip, and then tears came. They passed and she got on a horse and rode toward the Smith farm, carrying her rifle. She met the Jones family and Jones said, "Stella Cartright. Where is Peter?"

"He left me."

Nobody said anything. Soon another family—man, woman, two boys—joined them. They rode at a wild, reckless pace.

The signal fire burned.

They met Buck and Tortilla Joe and the remainder of the farmers at the appointed meeting-place. Buck counted them, noticed two were absent, and he said nothing. Some men had big mouths but no guts. Some had lots of courage and

spoke seldom. Some ran off at the mouth and, when the showdown came, had what it took—raw-red courage. Some seldom spoke, put over a good impression, and then ran like rabbits when the bullets came down. A man could never tell. He held up his hand, and they were silent. They crowded around him, men and women mounted on old horses, girls and youths with guns in their young hands—and over it all the cold impersonal Wyoming moon.

Buck said, "I'm your leader. You appointed me yourselves. Therefore every word I say has to be obeyed."

"Amen," the minister intoned.

Quickly Buck outlined his plan of attack. And they listened, and they nodded; they agreed. The men would fight in first, and behind them would come their women and the young folks. They knew the lay of the land around the Smith farm. Smith and his family would desert their cabin and take to the timber, getting Hammond with them —they'd carry him, if needs be. Then the farmers would build a ring around the Cross in a Circle raiders, penning them in.

"Give us our stations," Jones said.

Quickly Buck designated the men who would attack from given points. Behind them the signal fire lifted, a glittering challenge to them.

"That is all," Buck said.

Tortilla Joe said, "There ees one theeng more, amigos. Our minister, he say a few words to Dios."

The Mexican's hat came down and was held over his barrel-like chest.

Other hats were doffed; heads sank down. And the minister prayed to God for aid, his voice clear and loud. A horse stirred, shifting his forefeet; the creek talked, and a trout jumped.

"Amen, brethren."

Buck said, "Thanks, brother," and then, "We ride and we ride fast. And good luck to you, our neighbors."

"The same to you, Buck."

Then they were riding, a body of riders, dark under the moon. Moonlight glistened on upraised rifles; there was the smell of ageless dust; the good odor of sweaty horseflesh. Tortilla Joe and Buck took the lead, with the others stringing out behind them.

Buck said, "You lead them, amigo. I ride back to look them over."

"*Si*, Bucks."

Buck swung his horse, and the riders went by. He saw men with old pistols, men with rifles; he saw women who, a few months before, had not known how to ride a horse. He saw the Jones girl, her dark hair in braids; he remembered Sandra Smith's black hair. He put his horse close to that

of Mrs. Jones and her daughter. He said, "Be careful, please."

The mother said, "Thank you, sir."

The girl looked at him. She was deathly afraid, and her face was pale—even the moonlight showed that.

"Mr. McKee," she said, "with you on our side, we will win."

Buck felt a moment of great reverence. Hoofs pounded, horses panted, and the fire burned, egging them on. His hand went out and met hers and held for a moment and he said, "Thank you for that, Miss Jones."

Her eyes glowed momentarily.

Chapter TWENTY-FOUR

IT WAS THE Crow Squaw, Many Feathers, who brought the Ringbone Valley war to an end.

She had scouted the Cross in a Circle outfit, and she saw Matt Williams ride out with his riders. She followed their progress, keeping to the rimrock ledges, riding the high dark lifts of the back country.

She followed them to the Smith farm.

The scout had already warned the Smiths, and they had taken to the brush. Sandra had lit the signal fire. Paul Hammond, prompted by the duress of the occasion, had left the cabin under his own power, although he was still weak and his wound had not completely healed.

Many Feathers sat her saddle for a while, building her plan of action; finally, rifle in hand, she slid from her old horse and she left him standing there, reins on the ground.

She would play a lone hand.

She saw Matt Williams dismount his riders, and they worked toward the Smith farm, moving through the brush. Pete Smith saw one of the Cross in a Circle riders, and he shot at him, and the battle started.

By this time, Matt Williams knew he was in for a fight. The signal fire, blazing on the hill, had told him that.

He cursed methodically. He said to Ag Keller, "Take the three men there and circle that butte and get Smith and put him out of business with a bullet."

"How about the girl?"

"What girl?"

"Smith's daughter."

Matt Williams said, harshly, "Are you gettin' soft, fella? Kill her, of course!"

Ag Keller said, softly, "This is a rough deal. First, where is that squaw, and next, this gent Mike Latham—he's wild about his son gettin' killed."

"We'll take care of both."

Matt Williams and Ag Keller had held a hurried consultation. The farmers would come in, beckoned to this trouble by the crooked finger of this fire, and they would move back, and catch the farmers in a trap.

"That's it, Matt."

Accordingly they had built a circle, then they moved back. They sneaked through brush, through timber; moonlight showed them crossing clearings, running bent-over, running crouched over rifles or shot-guns.

Many Feathers watched, face stolid. She had

one job. She would accomplish that, or she would die. There had been only one man in her world. His name had been Big Bob Williams. He was dead. There would never be another man for her. She touched her swollen, ugly face. The boots of Big Bob's son had done that to her face.

Had Big Bob been alive, he would have killed his son—his only son—for that.

But Big Bob Williams was dead.

Accordingly, the Crow squaw watched, and waited. She saw Buck McKee make his farmers dismount, and she saw the outline this battle was to take. She worked her way forward, moving swiftly despite her obesity, and her moccasins made little noise on the dried Wyoming earth.

Buck McKee was also fighting from the underbrush.

He had heard Pete Smith's shot, and accordingly he had made his farmers dismount; they had moved ahead, rifles and pistols ready. The brush seemed to reach out and grab them. One moment they were in the open; the next they were out of sight. It happened that fast.

Tortilla Joe worked at Buck's right, always out of sight, but always within hearing distance. The rifles and pistols were talking now, and their sounds were ugly in the night.

Buck stopped, stood in the dark shadows of a cottonwood. He watched and listened, and his

spine was cold: he did not fancy this type of fighting. It was too secretive, too deadly, too unexpected. A bullet come from the brush and it would hit a man and kill him and he would never know who had fired it.

Evidently some of the Cross in a Circle riders had put fire to Smith's cabin, for it burned with a sharp, blue flame that lighted the brush and the hills. It snarled and spat sparks upward, as though angry at man and his foolishness. Brands arched upward, landed, died.

Across the brush came the call, "Plows and harnesses," which was the signal the farmers had taken for recognition in the night. Another signal was, "Remember Sid Latham," and another was, "This is the end." You could hear those cries, and they were harsh and rough.

The fight lasted about an hour. It was run and fire as you ran, shoot as fast as you could—hope to kill. Buck kept working his way around, looking for Matt Williams or Ag Keller. He had a plan and he hoped it would work.

He figured that if Matt Williams got killed or shot out of commission, the Cross in a Circle hands might surrender, being without a leader. If both Williams and Keller got put out of the fight, then he was sure the hirelings would drift out. And he worked toward this end.

Before he met either, though, he downed one

Cross in a Circle man. He did not kill the man but that was not his fault; he shot to kill. But he saw the man roll over, dropping his rifle; the man rolled into the brush and out of sight.

He and Tortilla Joe worked together. Within thirty minutes, the Mexican had a broken right arm. His hand was limp and blood ran down his forearm. Buck wanted him to retire out of the fight but the Mexican only grinned and said he was in it until the last dog was hung and rope-cut.

"Thees over, we rides for Utah, Buck."

"For Utah, Tortilla Joe."

"We feeneesh thees, an' we rides." Tortilla Joe grinned good-naturedly, but it was a sickly grin —a tired, painful gesture. "Me, I theenk I sees the squaw a while backs, over there." He gestured with his pistol. "But I not sure, Bucks."

"Don't worry about her, Tortilla Joe. Get either Keller or Williams, and this is over."

Within ten minutes, Buck had shot down Ag Keller. Keller had darted across a small park and Buck had stepped out and called to him. Keller stopped, turned, said in a terrible voice, "McKee!", and his pistol had shown red. Buck shot him through the chest and knocked him down. Keller dropped his pistol, grunted, tried to get up, got to his knees and bent over. Buck waited, and Keller stood that way, and Buck took a chance and walked forward.

Keller screamed, "Matt, I'm hit."

Just then, Matt Williams, who had watched from the brush, stepped out and he had his rifle on Buck. Buck stopped, looked at him, and fear rode wildly through the lanky cowpuncher.

Buck wondered, in that moment, where Tortilla Joe was, for he knew that Williams would kill him. He couldn't turn around fast enough to down Williams, for the Cross in a Circle owner had a gunsight on him. All Williams had to do was drop his trigger.

Buck had to raise his gun, turn, and then fire.

Matt Williams said, "This gives me pleasure, McKee."

Buck made his play. He went to one knee, and he brought up his pistol—then, pistol level, he knelt there—he did not fire.

He did not have to fire.

Williams was caving in, hand on his chest, his mouth open. His knees, too, were moving out from under him. His mouth was open and no sound came and that was odd. And then Buck realized the man was dead in his boots.

Ag Keller had rolled over on his side, and Buck gave him a quick glance. Keller, though, was out of this. Buck waited until the roar of the rifle rolled into oblivion and then he got to his feet.

"Tortilla," he said, "you got him."

But it was not Tortilla Joe who came out of the brush. It was the Crow squaw, Many Feathers.

She stood there, looking at Matt Williams' body, and her face was old, it was savage, it was gray with hate.

Buck said, "You—you killed him."

She lifted her eyes. They were sunken and dead under the light of the moon. "I waited for this," she said.

Then, she turned, and she went into the brush.

She disappeared. . . .

Behind Buck, a man threshed through buck-brush. Buck got to his feet and turned, then he lowered his pistol.

"I hear you make the call, Buck."

Buck said, "Williams is dead. Keller is wounded. Spread the word, quick."

Within ten minutes the Cross in a Circle gunmen were running. Within another five minutes, the farmers were alone—a jubilant bunch of men and women. Within another five minutes, Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe were riding out of Ringbone Valley.

The water was ice-cold, coming from the mountain springs, and the man's heavy body knifed across it, as he swam overhand. He reached the far bank, sat on the grass, and said, "My arm, she ees well, Buck. She heal fast."

Buck McKee, naked as the day he had been born, lay on the rushes, looking at the blue sky.

"Good old Utah," he said. "One more day, and we reach Marty's spread. Man, he'll run out, eyes sparklin'."

"I can sees heem now," Tortilla Joe said. "Buck, read the letter again to me, no?"

"I've only read it three times, and we just got it this mornin' in Provo. Why don't you learn to read?"

"Too much the works, Buck."

They lay on their naked backs and looked at the cloudless sky. The water was good. The earth was good. The sun was good.

"Me, I knows what that letter says, I just joke. It come from Sandra. She ees a beauty, no."

"She aims to marry Hammond," Buck said. "They'll make a nice couple." He glanced at his partner. "Better'n you an' Margarita."

"Margarita, she mad, Sandra say. Ag Keller, he talk, he go to jail. John Powers, he get keeled by Mike Latham. Latham, he revenge his dead boy."

"Revenge," Buck murmured. "A useless thing."

"Jacob Mudd he talk like mad, Sandra write. There ees teen in the valley. Now there ees a big teen rush." He chuckled at that—a deep, heavy sound. "Me, I hear of gold rush, but never a teen rush."

"Tin, not teen."

Tortilla Joe said. "What the heck difference does she make—teen or tin? Let them struggle for eet. Buck, in my saddlebag, there are two tortillas—the last two fat Margarita she make for Tortilla Joe."

"What about them?"

"We eat them. We make toast with them."

"I don't like them. Why do we both have to eat them?"

Tortilla Joe waddled over and got the tortillas and unwrapped them. He defiled the pool by throwing into it their paper wrappers. Buck sat up and took one. "I'd rather have a beer," he grunted. "Whoever heard of eating a toast to somebody? You *drink* a toast, not *eat* one."

"We no got beer, so we eat a toast." Tortilla Joe's white teeth smashed into the tortilla. "To fat Margarita, who weel not marry me."

Buck bit, winced. "To Sandra," he said. "Sandra, with the pretty dark eyes. And to Ringbone Valley."

"And to Ringbone Valley," the fat Mexican intoned.

BULLET LAW

The West was built by strong men, men who cared little for the conventions of the tame East . . . or for the law. They took what they wanted, and devil take any who dared stand in the way!

But the strong men were dying, and the West was changing. Like it or not, civilization was moving in, and with schoolhouses and churches and growing towns came peaceful farmers, wanting nothing more than a piece of land of their own . . . land begrudged by the range lords. For every half-section fenced in meant that much less land for their empires. The cattlemen vowed to stop the invasion from the East—no matter what the cost. And soon the invasion of farmers was matched by an invasion of hired guns, anxious to deal death for pay!

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